

The Last Heist

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Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Fandoms:	Minecraft (Video Game) , Video Blogging RPF , Dream SMP
Relationships:	Wilbur Soot & Technoblade & TommyInnit & Phil Watson , Wilbur Soot & TommyInnit & Phil Watson , Wilbur Soot & TommyInnit , Technoblade & TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , No Romantic Relationship(s) , Ranboo & Toby Smith Tubbo & TommyInnit
Characters:	Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Wilbur Soot , Toby Smith Tubbo , Alexis Quackity , Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF) , Grayson Purpled (Video Blogging RPF) , GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Charlie Dalgleish Slimecicle , Sam Awesamdude
Additional Tags:	SBI family dynamics , there weren't enough sci fi aus for my liking so here we go i guess , im a sucker for found family , Sleepy Bois Inc Angst , Sleepy Bois Inc Fluff , Hurt TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Protective Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , Protective Wilbur Soot , Alternate Universe - Science Fiction , Alternate Universe - Modern Setting , Found Family , Angst , Hurt/Comfort , Fluff , Sleepy Bois Inc as Family , TommyInnit Needs a Hug (Video Blogging RPF) , sbi , BAMF TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Post-Apocalypse , Dystopia , Dark Sleepy Bois Inc , but not really theyre just morally grey , phil is also there , Families of Choice , Abandoned Work - Unfinished and Discontinued
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of The Last Days
Collections:	This is insomnia , let C!Tommy be happy pls I beg , Val DSMP Dystopia , great reads , DSMP fic recs , Elrics fic recs , self employed!! , canon divergence , Toads Top (absolute banger) Fics tm , lee's favorite fics that you should definitely read as well :) , MCYT Fic Rec , SBI Fics for the soul , fics to knock your socks off , wow i really am reading mc fanfiction 🥰🥰 , Noopa's Inspirations , Neats fave c!tommy centric fics , Found family to make me feel something , minecraft fanfics that make my last braincell vibrate at the speed of light , favorites , SBI fics that give me the will to live , Cross' Collection of DSMP/SBI fics (unfinished) , Completed works that I would most likely come back to when feeling nostalgic , Sbi bamf fics that just <3 (and some angst of course) , My absolute favorites <3 , incomplete v good fics , Rebel's favorite fics! (smp) , absolutely amazing stunning 10/10 , dino's minecraft hyperfixations , Best of DSMP , Heart eye emoji , BAMF SBI Fics , Wani's sbi hyperfixation of (mostly) super hero fics , fics i eat for breakfast , i don't read dsmp fics (or do i??) , Simply the best dsmp Fics , I swear to god if I start crying I'm blaming youuuu /pos , Yeah minecraft , mcyt fics I lovelovelove , WOO Insomnia Time , fics i read in 2021 (i am embarrassed) , mcyt faves 📺 , cauldronrings favs (•̀ω•́)✧ , Cowokie Favourites - MCYT , the universe admires these works of art , Literally the embodiment of 'chefs kiss' , Talented. Brilliant. Incredible. Amazing. Showstopping. Spectacular , Minecraft/content creator related fics , fics I could reread a million times , my fav fics ever - mostly sbi that are tommy centric , a collection of every dsmp fic i've read , c20w_'s stash of treasures , DSB (DreamSmpBooks) , reallyreallywanttoread , fen's favorite fics , dsmp fanfics i would suggest to anyone
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The Last Heist

by [crystalSkiez](#)

Summary

In Manburg there's no mercy for criminals. Getting caught by the guards is an immediate death sentence.

Tommy has managed to avoid them for 9 years now--by day, as an arrogant pickpocket with a mouth almost as fast as his hands, and by night as the renowned Underground thief known only as Theseus.

Things are going well, all things considered.

And then he gets a message from the infamous Antarctic gang and everything goes to shit.

Now Tommy has to handle pulling off the heist of his life, all while hiding his true identity from both the tyrannical government and his new associates in the most feared gang in the city.

or

I wanted a sci-fi found family AU with the SBI gang

Chapter 1

Tommy Innit was going to die.

At this point there was little doubt. He could only run for so long. As agile as he was, as long as he had spent preparing for exactly these sorts of situations, even he needed a break at some point. Eventually his breaths would get heavy, his throat would get thick, and his legs would give out, and in an instant it would all be over. Nine years of surviving on the streets, of making an actual *name* for himself, for nothing.

There was no escape, not from this. The guards, with their artificially enhanced muscles and lungs, would essentially never tire, so not only would they inevitably catch up to him but once they did none of them would even be tired enough to consider maybe *not* beating him to a pulp. With his luck, those overgrown gorillas would be too hopped up on their power trip to stop pummeling him anytime before he was a smear on the pavement. Hip *fucking* hooray.

He heard the *zhing* of a bullet whizzing past his ear and realized with growing panic that he had slowed down while lost in thought.

Fuck. He really needed to remember to be more focused whenever he was facing imminent death. He could practically feel the heat of the guards' breath on the back of his neck now. Or maybe it was just his imagination. He didn't dare turn back to check.

Tommy knew what he would see anyway--from what he could tell from the pounding footsteps behind him, there were maybe seven or eight of the guards trailing him. They had been on a routine city patrol when they had come across him, which was just his luck because it meant that they were armed to the teeth and wearing their armored uniforms, the ones that looked eerily like ordinary business suits at a first glance. He'd had situations like this before, of course. Danger sort of came with the job, so it wasn't completely unusual for a lone, off-duty officer to stumble in on him in the middle of a gig. It had never been a problem before--he would deal with them with a firm swing of his staff to their head, and by the time they regained their balance he would be long gone.

That probably wouldn't work with an entire squadron of them though.

It really had just been dumb luck that they had come across him. Tommy had memorized all of the guard routes in the city, and he always, *always*, kept well clear of them, especially when he was working a job. It was bad enough crossing their path on an ordinary day, but having a squadron catch you in the middle of a crime? It was a death wish. Tommy may have had a shit attention span, but even he wasn't that stupid. He knew to stay far, far away from them. Which was why he was so surprised when he looked up from picking the lock on the microchip storage facility to see a dozen of the fuckers charging toward him.

Another bullet whizzed past his head. Shit. If Tommy hadn't been sprinting at literal breakneck speeds, the blood probably would've drained from his face.

He forced his legs to move even faster, pushing himself even further. He could feel it starting to wear on him now, his breaths coming in shorter gasps, and his thoughts became a singular stream of jumbled words as every instinct he had cultivated was replaced with panic.

--fuck fuck fuck bitches on my tail shit this is not good oh fuck oh fuck im dead im SO dead no no im a big fucking man i can handle a few guards, wait no i definitely fucking CAN'T--

In short, Tommy was screwed and he knew it.

To be fair, it had only been a matter of time. Tommy was a criminal, through and through, and Manburg wasn't exactly known for its merciful justice system.

Technological marvel? Sure. Flourishing economy? Without a doubt.

But lenient with civil rights? Definitely not. The city didn't even have a proper prison; either you were beaten to death on sight, held in a guard station before an immediate and brutal public execution, or you were dragged away to President Schlatt's White House, never to be seen again. Tommy wasn't sure which was worse.

With a start, Tommy realized he had somehow found his way into the upper-class district of Manburg. The Lights, they called it, for the shiny buildings that sparkled in the sunlight and the hundreds of thousands of lights that turned on at dusk, illuminating the horizon like a sky full of stars. Everything was clean and orderly and *neat* here, which meant that Tommy usually stayed far, far away from it unless he was working a job, because he stuck out like a sore thumb. Which was just absolutely perfect for his current situation, because *why not* make the guards jobs easier for them. He could have headed toward the slums of the city and faded into the background of all the other beggars and thieves, but *of course*, he headed to the one place in the city where he had absolutely no chance of blending in. His dark cape and ripped shorts were practically a neon sign above his head in the midst of the too-white clothing and shiny jewelry of the upper-class citizens he was running past.

It was getting harder and harder to keep up his pace. The footsteps behind him seemed even louder now. Tommy was undoubtedly fast, but he was a born sprinter--he was made for bursts of high energy and fiery impulsiveness. He wasn't built for this type of endurance. He had maybe three more minutes before he straight up collapsed. Less if the guards caught up to him first. There was literally no way this situation could get any worse.

And then he heard it in the distance. A faint whirring. A buzzing in the air like a too-fast fan, rapidly getting louder. Closer.

Oh, fuck me. Literally, why.

Now he had the search drones on his tail? Couldn't he catch a *fucking* break? I mean sure, he had been breaking into one of the most secure tech facilities in the city, but did it really warrant all of this fuss? Clearly they thought so, because the mechanical buzzing was echoing in his skull now, practically shaking the ground. If Tommy looked back, he knew he would see a fleet of the small silver robots careening through the air towards him, metallic heads searching the street for his puffy blond hair, fatally sharpened pincers ready to cut through flesh and bone. And fuck, if Tommy wasn't suddenly terrified. Even with the guards, there had been a tiny hope in him, that maybe, just maybe, he could outsmart them all. The guards of the city weren't exactly known for their sparkling personalities or considerable intellect. They were instruments of raw physical strength, and that was it. It wasn't difficult to confuse them. He had outsmarted them before.

But you can't outsmart an AI, and especially not the search drones, which were lightning fast and designed solely for the purpose of hunting down fugitives and then systematically executing them in the most brutal way. He had seen them in action once before, when a man in the Eastside slums had knocked out a guard. Tommy had been ten, nibbling on a stale loaf of bread in an alleyway to the side of the sector's main square, when an ear-splitting buzzing descended from every direction, buzzing and hissing like a massive horde of flies. He'd clutched his hands over his ears, stumbling out of the alleyway just in time to see two dozen of the bots descend on the man like flashes of silver lightning, cutting and stabbing and--.

Even over his hands clutched to his head, even over that terrible, ravenous buzzing, Tommy had heard the screams.

An instant later and suddenly the entire square went completely silent. All that was left of the man was a red stain and a single hand, sitting unassumingly on the pavement.

So yeah. He was done for. All his time spent slaving away to get his own little space, to cultivate his loyal customer base for his side job, all his time spent gaining power in the Unde--.

And suddenly, just like that, Tommy had an idea. A risky, dangerous, insane idea. An idea that redefined the meaning of stupid. Tommy grinned, despite everything. Those were his specialty.

A map of the Lights appeared in his mind, pieced together from years of illegal supply runs, and Tommy charted his new path, turning down an alleyway between two silver buildings, guards still hot on his tail.

His flash of excitement at the plan quickly died down into cool calculation as the reality of the situation descended on him. Fuck, this would be close. The guards were literally just seconds behind him, and if even a single one spotted what he was about to attempt, if any of the drones caught his escape in their lens, he risked exposing everything. Part of him argued that his life wasn't worth it. Every hidden secret, every blessed reprieve for the people of this damned city was on the line. If Tommy fucked up, he would undoubtedly be ruining the lives of a good portion of the city.

The other part of him, the stronger, instinctual part, screamed with undeniable certainty that he wanted to live. He couldn't go out like this, not when he was just starting to do something with his life.

So Tommy shoved the fancily dressed snobs walking through the streets out of his way and made another sharp turn toward a towering silver building a few hundred yards away. The buzzing of the drones was louder than ever now, bullets still whizzing past his head despite all of the innocent people in the streets. *A few more seconds*, Tommy pleaded to himself, *just let me last a few more seconds*. He repeated the mantra over and over in his head, pushing his legs to move faster even as his knees threatened to buckle. And finally, he reached the crystal-clear glass doors of his target, shoving through them with his last burst of strength.

The glass shattered behind him as he ran. The lobby of the tower was ornate, with tall quartz columns and a patterned tile floor. Far too expensive for the drones to ruin. Tommy knew their algorithms, and he knew that they were constantly running cost-benefit analysis of the situation, and he knew that destroying the lobby of one of the most prestigious buildings in the city far outweighed catching one rascal of a kid. There was no way they'd follow him. One obstacle down. The guards, however, were a different story.

He could still hear their heavy boots trailing him as he raced through the maze of hallways, but each second he gained another little shred of hope. He was so close. Another right turn. Pushing his legs to pump even faster against the rich carpets. He was almost there. Another left where two hallways met.

And suddenly, he was there. Tommy threw open the door to the men's bathroom, desperately hoping it was still there, that he hadn't somehow gotten the location of the entrance mixed up. He scanned the decorative paintings on the wall frantically; the first a mural of the Lights at night, the next a still life of a vase of flowers, and---there. He pushed the painting of a pair of massive white wings to one side and gasped his relief. It was there. The entrance was still there waiting for him. A small gap, maybe two feet wide, just barely big enough for him to fit through. Tommy heard footsteps pound just outside the bathroom door, and in a rush of panic launched himself through the gap, crashing into a small compartment barely the size of a clothes dresser.

The painting swung shut behind him, just as the door to the bathroom creaked open. A pair of heavy boots thudded across the room and froze in front of the painting. His soul left his body. This was it.

Tommy could do nothing more than hold his breath, his entire body quaking from fear and adrenaline. He wanted nothing more than for this whole thing to finally be over, for him to finally be safe, but one wrong move, one too-loud breath and the guards would certainly hear it, and everything would be lost. Not only would he be dead, but every criminal, every friend he ever had would be hunted.

The guard hesitated for one terrible moment, and then, "Move out. The street trash is gone."

Heavy footsteps filed out of the room. The bathroom went silent.

Tommy waited for a minute. Two.

It was all Tommy could do to keep from letting out an arrogant whoop. Still, he let a shaky, triumphant grin cross his face as he finally turned to the other side of the tiny compartment, where a black, metallic chute descended into a dark abyss.

And no one had to know if quiet tears slid down his face as he slid through the pitch-black void toward the crime central of Manberg. The Underground, or as its residents loved to call it: Pogtopia.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Tommy is stranded in a casino.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy landed in the fanciest bar he had ever seen.

The room seemed to stretch on forever, filled with rows and rows of empty gambling tables made from thick, polished wood and blood red carpet sidings. A long bar stretched along one side of the room, and Tommy could see shelves upon shelves of illegal substances displayed behind the counter -- everything from the mildest form of alcohol to the most addictive of drugs.

High arches of polished spruce towered over him, inlaid with glittering speckles of gold, and soft, red-tinted lights cast a dim, mysterious glow across the entire room.

Tommy couldn't help but stare. He had never been to this side of the Underground, the side made for the rich and powerful. The pubs that he frequented were little more than darkened holes carved out of the solid ground. Nothing like *this*.

And that, Tommy realized, left him with yet another issue.

How the fuck am I supposed to get out of here?

He did need to get back to his den in the Eastside slums at some point, and traveling there on the surface was not an option with the guards and the drones still searching for him. The trip to Eastside through the Underground was possible, at least theoretically. Every single chamber of the Underground was connected in some way or another, a vast, criss-crossing web of tunnels and rooms, so a path back to his house definitely *existed*. The problem was finding it.

Tunnel entrances in the Underground were strictly on a need-to-know basis. It was one of the few unspoken rules that governed the lawlessness of the criminal network. A place like this, full of the rich and powerful, was essentially one massive security risk--if a patron somehow stumbled upon a tunnel to one of the darker, more dangerous sections of the Underground, there was no guarantee they wouldn't go straight to the city guards and expose everything. So the tunnels were hidden, their locations only given out to the most trusted of individuals.

Which left Tommy in a bit of a tricky situation, because he had never seen this place in his life. Even if he somehow managed to find one of the hidden tunnels, which was unlikely enough on its own, there was no guarantee that the tunnel would lead him back toward the Eastside and not straight into some sort of drug den or blood cult or something. Searching for a tunnel was out of the question.

The next best option was finding someone and begging them for help. Tommy hated that. He wasn't inclined to the whole begging thing. People tended to look down on him when he asked for help and he didn't want any of that pity shit. He was a big fucking man. He didn't need them to look at him with their sad smiles and talk down to him like he was a kid. He could handle it on his own.

Whatever. It wasn't like that whole talking to people thing would've worked out anyway. He was sure a ritzy bar like this place was packed full at night, but it was hardly midday at that point and all of its normal occupants were probably stuck in board meetings or writing office emails or whatever the fuck it was that rich people actually did. The casino was empty save for a few stragglers, and it wasn't like he could ask *them*. Even from here Tommy could see the faint golden glow emanating from their skin, the way their smiles had gone all dopey. Glow addicts were practically catatonic when they were under the influence, and if you had started taking the highly addictive drug the chances were you were *always* under the influence.

And who wouldn't take it? The strange golden powder unlocked your deepest desires, tricking your brain into essentially thinking that your life was, as Tommy put it, *the shit*. If he tried to approach them he would get a blank grin at best, and at worst they would start to ramble at him about whatever dreamland the Glow had taken them off to. For now though, they sat slumped in corners and against the walls, looking like they had never known the feeling of pain.

Tommy would be lying if he said he hadn't ever wanted to try it. Just once. Just to see what being that impossibly happy was like.

He always shut those thoughts down as soon as they popped into his brain. They were dangerous. Nothing in the real world could ever quite match the ecstasy of the drug, and Glow was expensive. No one in the slums could afford it more than once, but once was all it ever took. One taste of Glow and you were hooked for life. Tommy refused to get near the stuff. There was no greater a deterrent from drugs than walking by the junkies as they slumped on the side of the streets, some of them crying, others just staring off into space. They all died eventually. They just faded away, too lost to ever recover. No one bothered to move their bodies.

Tommy shuddered. So asking someone for help was a no go then.

Tommy glanced back up at the shiny black chute above his head and hopelessly wondered whether he could climb his way back up it. The slide had been small and slick on his way down, so it might take some maneuvering, but maybe he could put his feet on either side and sort of spider crawl up it? Of course, there was always the issue of what would happen if someone came down the chute if he was still climbing up it, and *that* would be a whole new disaster he would have to--

"AY! Who the fuck are you?" a voice shouted at him, snapping him out of his thoughts, and Tommy whipped towards the noise to see a man storming across the room. The first thing Tommy really noticed about him was the beanie. It just seemed so out of place with the rest of his look, which seemed to scream *I am powerful beyond belief*--the fitted grey suit, the tailored boots, the golden rings, all of it was ruined by the navy blue hat that let only a few strands of his short, dark hair escape. The man's dark eyes narrowed as he glared at Tommy.

"Hey asshole," the man yelled, still stomping over, "I'm talking to you!"

The next thing Tommy realized was that the man was incredibly short, and he might've laughed at the entire situation if the man didn't look like he would throw all of the power in his five-foot three body into strangling him at that very moment. Tommy swallowed down his laugh.

The strange man was standing in front of him now and Tommy realized he should probably say *something*.

"Who am I?" Tommy's mind raced. There was no way he could tell the man that he was from the slums. This guy could be part of some crime ring or worse, *rich*, and kids from the slums were a dime a dozen. He wasn't about to reveal just how *expendable* he really was.

"I am, uh, I'm a friend of the owner of this fine establishment, of course." Tommy puffed up his chest, standing just a little straighter. There. No one would risk hurting him now, not if it would get them in trouble with whatever powerful business-douche owned the casino.

“A friend. Of the owner.” Beanie guy looked Tommy up and down--taking in the rips in his clothes, the dirt under his fingernails, the blood smeared on his skin--and raised an eyebrow in clear disbelief.

Tommy laughed loudly, but it sounded nervous, forced. “Yeah, of course, I’m always running errands for him you know, he has me go and, uh, fetch him papers and handle all the drug shipments and do all the important shit for him, because he’s a real busy man you know, and sometimes he tells me, he says, ‘Tommy, you’re just so absolutely epic and I should pay you lots of Primes.’ and I says back, ‘All in a day’s work, big man.’ because we really just have that level of respect with each other, he knows I’m just so--”

“Tommy, is it?” Beanie guy glared down at him. “*I’m* the owner.”

Well, shit.

Tommy panicked, stepping away from the man, but before he could move there was a hand clutching the back of his collar, yet another poised at his neck. The sharp edge of a knife pressed into his throat. Tommy froze.

“Now,” Beanie guy started, glaring up at him in a way that meant business, “You want to tell me what you’re really doing down here, street rat?” For one of the first times in his life, Tommy didn’t have anything to say. His throat worked helplessly, and the blade cut further into his neck, a single red line appearing on his skin.

“You going to say something, kid?” Beanie guy looked to be just about on his last nerve, but Tommy just couldn’t find another excuse. Clearly the non-answer didn’t seem to please the man, because his hand tightened around the back of Tommy’s neck and the knife pushed just a little bit deeper. “You here to try and steal from me, asshole? Bring back some of the good stuff for your little thieving friends?”

Ok well, *fuck* this guy. What the actual hell. Just because Tommy was from the slums and just because he *happened* to be a pickpocket didn’t mean he just went around stealing stuff. Tommy liked to think of himself as more of a Robin Hood figure, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor and all that shit. It just so happened that *he* was ‘the poor’. Still, the audacity of this guy made anger bubble up in Tommy’s chest, and suddenly he found his voice again.

“What the hell dickhead, I don’t want your drugs.” Tommy snarled, “Just ‘cause I’m a little scuffed doesn’t mean I’m some thief, and if I was here to steal your shit I wouldn’t just be fuckin’ standing here, now would I? You’re talkin’ a lot of trash for someone who’s running an illegal casino, and how do I even know you’re not lying about that, huh? I don’t have a fuckin’ clue who you are, so you got any proof you’re actually the owner of this fine establishment? ‘Cause you sure don’t look like it with that stupid beanie and--”

The man let go of Tommy abruptly, taking a step back and dropping the knife from his neck. For a second he looked down at the ground, running a hand across his face and mumbling exasperatedly to himself in some language Tommy didn’t understand, before pointing to a neon sign on the wall of the casino that advertised ‘Quackity’s Casino’ in flashing lights. Tommy looked at the sign and back at the man expectantly. Beanie Guy sighed.

“*I’m* Quackity.” He bit out. Huh. So maybe he was the actual owner.

“Well, you’re a pretty shit bar owner if this is the way you treat your customers.” Tommy quipped.

Quackity sighed and rolled his eyes, clearly over the entire conversation, and turned towards the bar. He slid behind the counter, busying himself with cleaning shot glasses and pointedly ignoring the boy still standing in his business. Tommy, predictably, wasn’t deterred. Annoying people into compliance was sort of his thing. He climbed onto one of the bar stools near the man and slammed a palm on the countertop.

“Hey Quack-guy, pass me a regen pot.” Tommy shouted at the bartender. Tommy was still a little banged up, and the painkilling effect of the potion would be a virtual lifesaver.

“No.” Quackity didn't look up from where he was cleaning shot glasses.

Tommy, predictably, didn't take the rejection well. “What the fuck, why not?”

“Kid, you're like twelve--” Tommy sputtered in indignation, “--I'm not going to let you buy any illegal drinks. You don't need to get into that shit. Anyway, what are you even doing down in Pogtopia? Shouldn't you be off playing pranks on the cleaning drones or whatever it is kids from the slums do these days? And before you try to lie again, it's clear as day that you're from the slums. Your face says it all. I'm not going to fucking stab you over it, okay?”

Tommy sighed. Whatever. There was no point in lying now.

“I was in one of them mid-level sectors for some...business...and some of the guards just ‘appened to find me, and for absolutely no reason at all they just started like, chasin’ me down, no idea why because I was *definitely* not doin’ anything wrong at all, I am a man of the law--” Quackity scoffed, “--so of course I sped away from there real quick, but then I accidentally turned into The Lights and the search drones showed up and I thought I was fuckin’ screwed. I’m real quick on my feet though, real good at ‘mprovisation, and I remembered the entrance nearby. It was real close up there at the end, almost thought I was done for, but the guards aren’t exactly the brightest bulbs. So then I slide down that chute and realize I’ve never seen this place in my life, and then you come put your knife in my face and now I’m stuck here forever because I have no clue how to get back to the Eastside.”

“Well,” Quackity hesitated for just a second before he spoke, “I can help with that.”

Tommy stared in awe as they walked, just taking in the strange sights of the casino. He saw a pile of raw diamonds in the middle of a casino table and had to stop himself from snatching one. He ogled the massive paintings covering the walls. Quackity had to physically drag him away from an aquarium filled with schools of colorful tropical fish.

Finally, they stopped in front of a massive wooden cabinet.

“Well, here we are.” Quackity pulled open the heavy spruce door to reveal that it was filled with more tailored suits, much like the one the man was currently wearing. And that was it. It was literally just a coat closet.

Tommy stared at Quackity. “You sure you haven’t had any of those drugs recently?”

Quackity sighed, mumbling something under his breath about *kids these days* and *no appreciation for the dramatic* before he reached into the closet. His fingers searched the walls for a second before he paused, grinning triumphantly as he pressed down on a hidden button with a little click. The false back of the cabinet swung open, revealing a ladder and a hole that led down into a dimly lit tunnel. Tommy whooped happily, glad that this whole nightmare could finally be done with and shoved through the business suits hanging in the closet.

“Now to get to the Eastside just climb down there and go left. The tunnel should go on for a mile or two until you reach the first intersection, and from there hang a right and you’ll be at Pog Pub in no time.” Quackity instructed, leaning against the cabinet door. “And don’t get any ideas about coming back here to steal any of my potions. I know how you street kids are.” Quackity grinned. Tommy scowled back at him.

He turned back toward the hole in the floor of the cabinet, carefully climbing down the ladder into the depths of the tunnel. As his boots hit the pavement he grinned. Another hour and he would be home.

Finally. He gave Quackity a little salute as he turned toward the left direction of the darkened path.

Tommy didn't see it, but Quackity's eyes softened just a little. "You ever need me, you know where to find me, kid."

"Thanks Big Q," Tommy turned to look up at Quackity one last time, "We really should have a chat about your customer service someti--"

The tunnel door slammed shut.

Chapter End Notes

Can you tell that I hate writing dialogue?

Trust me when I say there is actual SBI in this fic. It'll be worth the wait, I promise.

More to come soon :))

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Tommy finally makes it home.
We (sorta) get our first SBI appearance?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Dusk had settled over the city by the time Tommy re-emerged from the Underground, the last glimmer of gold just peeking out above the Walls as he crawled out of a moss-covered pipe in an alleyway. It wasn't Tommy's usual entrance to the Underground and it was a distance from his house, but he didn't mind the walk. Tommy had always thought the city was especially beautiful at night, even in the slums. The streets were mostly empty--everyone without a death wish had holed up somewhere by now--and the pale glow of the moonlight always made the city seem more peaceful than unsettling. In the distance, The Lights twinkled like a galaxy.

Tommy sighed. The sky was startlingly clear tonight, the evening air cool and crisp against his skin. Eastside was quiet. Not quite silent, never silent. There were too many people crammed together for that. But it was quiet, at least, and though Tommy had a hand on his staff and an ear out for patrol bots, he thought this might be one of the most peaceful moments he had ever had.

Maybe it was the leftover adrenaline from the near escape. Maybe it was the satisfaction of another job well done, the anticipation of pay day. Or perhaps it was the pearl moon looking down on him, the cool breeze in his hair. Whatever it was, Tommy felt--well, not quite happy, but he felt not-sad. Or angry. Which was new. Tommy reveled in it.

Maybe things were finally looking up.

Before he knew it, the soft glow of the bakery washed over him. Tommy took a glance through the windows of Bad and Skeppy's shop, double checking that nothing was amiss in the small brick bakery. To his relief, all was still inside the little store. Tommy lived in fear of the day someone decided--not entirely incorrectly--that the little shop was an easy target. Bad and Skeppy were simply too kind, and it was only a matter of time before someone took advantage of it to learn their weaknesses or manipulate their trust. It was something he scolded Bad about constantly, and they both chose not to mention that Tommy's small dwelling above the shop was a result of that same kindness. That Tommy being alive in the first place was a result of that kindness all those years ago when he first turned up in Eastside. But the couple wouldn't budge, and neither would Tommy, so instead he checked in on the shop each night, fending off anyone who might cause it harm. Twice before, he had fought off thugs intent on breaking in. He hadn't told Bad or Skeppy; didn't want them to worry.

They already had enough on their plates dealing with him.

Tommy climbed up the metal ladder on the side of the building, walking over to the small, windowless loft on the roof that had once served as the bakery's storage room. As always, Tommy opened the large, metal door by picking its lock. Bad and Skeppy had given him a key years ago, but being the notorious pickpocket that he was, Tommy knew well enough that keys could be stolen or lost or confiscated by guards. Lockpickers were significantly harder to come across than thieves, and Tommy could always use the practice.

After a minute of fiddling with his lockpicks the door opened with a small click, and finally, Tommy was *home*.

The room wasn't big by any means. Tommy could stretch his arms out in any direction and touch both walls, and the ceiling was low enough that jumping would earn him a nasty bump on his head, but the space was *his* and that was something not often found in Eastside. Against one wall sat his work setup--a ramshackle oak desk Sam had gifted him, complete with several shelves Tommy had drilled into the wall. Sitting on the desk was a tiny, ancient laptop he had scavenged ages ago, a few Prime cards that he had pre-loaded with emergency Primes, and an old but sturdy screwdriver.

Against another wall was a sturdy bookshelf. It didn't have any books of course; those were nearly impossible to find these days unless you wanted to pay a book dealer's exorbitant prices. Instead Tommy had devoted one shelf to his small store of food, another to his collection of clothes--three dark shirts and pairs of pants, some socks, and one extra pair of thin sneakers--and a final one to his weapons and personal treasures: a steel switchblade, a first aid kit, a pocketbook, an electronic music player that had died ages ago, and a bar of chocolate he was saving for a special occasion.

A small nook jutted out one side of the room, and there Tommy had made a makeshift bed, although it was more like a nest--a small den of worn blankets and flimsy, mismatched pillows on the floor. His walls were bare save for the shelves above his desk, a smudged mirror, and a massive torn flag.

Tommy's eyes caught on it, like they always did, eyes tracing over the lines on the bold yellow X, following the curve of the black semicircle. It was one of a kind. All the others like it had been burned long ago, Tommy was sure of it. In all his years he had never seen another one of the flags, although Tommy supposed one wouldn't just go around flaunting the flag of the previous regime, especially not under Schlatt's regime. It had been 16 years since Lmanburg had fallen to Schlatt, and getting caught with any paraphernalia still meant execution without exception. Tommy thought the whole thing was a tad paranoid.

Sighing, Tommy flopped into his desk chair. It had been a long day and he wanted nothing more than to curl up in his bed, but there was work to be done and people to be exploited. He powered on his laptop. Despite the exhaustion dragging at his mind, Tommy couldn't help the small rush of excitement that sprung up in him.

In the real world, he was nothing. Just one of the many faceless kids in an infinite sea of orphans and thieves. No one saw him for the man he really was. They all looked down on him. By Prime, even the Pogtopia bars, the very bars that sold *literal* hard drugs refused to give him even the mildest of potions, and those were as dangerous as a fizzy drink.

But here, in the den of his apartment on his shitty little scrap of a laptop, he became so much more. He became Theseus.

Outlaw extraordinaire, master thief, relentless mischief-maker. The genius who had never left a job unfinished. A staple of the Underground crime scene.

Not somebody to be trifled with.

Tommy's business model was simple: the customers gave him Primes, and he gave them whatever item they might request, no holds barred. Unsurprisingly, business was in high demand.

Tommy opened the browser that led to the Underground's vast network of sites and connections, the very core of their operations.

Of course, the physical version of the Underground was important as well, and the intricate maze was great for a physical escape from the tyrannical government -- the virtually endless system of tunnels and rooms formed a massive labyrinth beneath Manburg. Entrances were hidden everywhere across the city, from the most unsuspecting of places -- behind dressing room mirrors, down manholes, through pipes -- to some of

the highest-class institutions in the city, most notably by entering a combination of special numbers into the buttons in an elevator at Prime Tower.

But the physical version of the Underground had a massive caveat too: *safety*.

The highest levels of the Underground were the ones most travelled to, and although nowhere in Pogtopia was ever truly safe, those floors were the closest you could get. Relatively easy to navigate, well-lit, and crowded, the top levels were made for the common delinquent--a way for a factory worker to take the edge off after work, a way for your casual upper-class citizen to feel a little rebellious, and a way for people like Tommy to avoid getting stabbed. There was still a general sense of morality and camaraderie up near the surface, so actual fights were rare, which meant if Tommy was ever forced to risk a trip into the Underground he could traverse those levels with relative ease. As you descended into the depths of the earth, however, things got a little more dicey. Tommy had only been to the mid-levels a few times and the experiences had all been...unpleasant, to say the least. The tunnels were twisted and rigged with traps, and everything was just a bit darker in general. The ground seemed to push on you from above, squeezing your chest just enough that it felt like you couldn't quite breathe. These levels were mostly home to contraband shops filled with illegal tech, gangs, maybe some book and potion dealers. Dangerous, but nothing compared to what Tommy had heard about the deepest parts of the Underground. Tommy didn't like to think about those stories, the ones that whispered of child fighting pits and gangs of cannibals.

And then, of course, there were always a few outliers, so even if you felt safe you always had to stay on your toes. The Underground was anything but predictable. Tommy knew for a fact that a death cult had their headquarters hidden somewhere in the top levels, and he had heard rumors of an ordinary pet shop in one of the deepest levels of the labyrinth.

So Tommy mostly stuck to the digital version of the Underground, which was much more suited to business deals and communication. You could make an account under any alias on the network, so it had a level of anonymity to it that was especially appreciated in Tommy's business: he couldn't give out his real name for his business, of course. Names had power, and though he was sure he had buried his identity long ago, things usually had a way of coming back to haunt him. A few keystrokes in a restricted database and anyone could unearth his entire life, and more importantly, his weaknesses. Not to mention the other skeletons in his closet that they might stumble on. Tommy couldn't afford that. If anyone found out he was only 16 it would destroy his reputation. He would just be some kid from the slums again. All of the insane heists, all of the jobs he had worked, would be boiled down to dumb luck. He would never get another job in his life.

So he would stay as Theseus. As far as anyone was concerned, Thomas Innett had died 9 years ago. Even Bad and Skeppy only knew him as Tommy.

Tommy logged in with his Theseus profile, opening his messages with a man known only as 404, the leader of the Feral gang.

21:45

Theseus: I have it.

404: Good. Delivery?

Theseus: You know the rules. No eyes on me, 1000 Primes pre-loaded onto a card, retrieval at 2300. Address?

404: Trash bin at the corner of L street. Card will be in there.

Theseus: Tonight then. No fucking mistakes.

[read]

21:52

404: You know we would recruit you in an instant if you would let us right?

[read]

Tommy sighed, leaving the message unanswered. This must've been the 5th time the man had tried to recruit him. Could he not take a *fucking* hint? Tommy was perfectly fine on his own, he was doing just *fine* without having to deal with the trouble of a gang there to tell him what to do, and he *wasn't* going to change his

mind. Did they think he needed their help or some shit? Hadn't he retrieved enough items for them by now that he could be trusted to handle stuff on his own? If he ever met dumb-fucking 404 you could bet he would give him a piece of his mind.

Tommy's fingers hovered above his keyboard. Half of him was tempted to just go off on him in the messages. He hesitated.

"UGHHHH." Tommy groaned, shoving himself away from the computer, and grabbing his black cloak and throwing it over his shoulders. 404's message glowed up at him tauntingly. "I gotta be all diplomatic and shit. Stupid fucking business manners, I swear if that bitch ever crosses my path IRL I'm gonna mess 'im up."

"404, what sort of dumbass name is that?" Tommy mumbled, grabbing the computer chip 404 had requested and shoving it into a small pouch in his cloak, "My name is fuckin' epic and cool and mysterious. The fuck is 404 supposed to mean?" He snatched his collapsible staff from his bookshelf as he moved toward the door.

Tommy took a quick glance in his mirror, checking that his cloak covered his piercing blue eyes and unruly blond hair. He was always wary to take measures to conceal his appearance--even without his name to expose his true identity, one good look at Tommy's features and everything would be exposed anyway. Normally he would wear a mask too, but this operation was routine, and the thick piece of fabric would've been more likely to get in his way than anything else.

"Fuck you, Feral boy." Tommy flipped off his still-open computer as he ran out of his room.

He headed west toward the middle-class ring of the city, where Tommy knew the drop off site would be, his feet clanging against the metal rooftops. His legs moved with a mind of their own, steering him toward the location--by now he had done enough jobs that he had memorized the layout of the entire city.

Manburg had been designed in a circular sort of fashion, with most maps separating the city into different rings.

The first ring, and the smallest, was The Lights. The haven of the powerful and the wealthy, filled to the brim with opulent mansions and home to dozens of towering skyscrapers that pierced the veil between land and sky, disappearing above the clouds. Tommy had never been to the top of one of the towers, but Sam had told him once that they were just high enough for you to catch a glimpse of the scarred wasteland outside of the Walls, that at night the entire city was spread out beneath you like a web of lightning. Tommy had long since decided that if he ever was able to snag a job in one of those skyscrapers he would take a detour to the top, no matter how risky it may be. It would be worth it, to touch the sky.

Jobs in The Lights had always been his favorite. Guards didn't usually want to harass people that had the power to ruin their lives in an instant, which meant that other than a few security bots or the occasional guard squadron, most of the buildings there were entirely unprotected.

The middle ring was, predictably, home to the middle class citizens of the city, serving as a buffer between the snobs of The Lights and the beggars of the poorer districts. It wasn't quite as shiny as The Lights there, not quite as unsettlingly pristine, but the streets were wide and well-swept and the markets were filled with laughing children, and even if Tommy would never be as happy as they were it still gave him some semblance of comfort. The ring was generally known as the shopping district so, accordingly, the vast majority of Tommy's jobs were located in that part of the city: raiding a technology manufacturing office or grabbing design plans from the house of some mid-level official or, in one case, nabbing a snow-white wedding gown from a boutique in one of the markets.

The level of security was much higher there than in The Lights, especially near the market areas where roaming thieves and pickpockets (see: Tommy) were likely to strike. It made spending time there a lot riskier, but Tommy couldn't help but be drawn to it. Some nights, he would sit alone on the rooftops of the

small brick condos in the residential areas, just listening to the melody of soft laughter and faint voices from the houses below. Some nights, it left a strange, hollow in his chest. He was never quite sure why.

The last ring, and the biggest by far, was the poor district. The slums. This part of the city clearly hadn't been planned out--up until the far outside of the middle class ring the streets were orderly and straight, and the buildings were symmetrical, spread evenly across every section. Past that, however, the cobblestone roads twisted and curved without sense, the buildings crammed together like boxy puzzle pieces. Tommy had often heard that The Lights were a miracle of modern architecture. He thought the real miracle was that the entire slums didn't collapse at the first gust of wind. The buildings were overwhelmingly devoted to housing. There were just too many people and not enough space, and it wasn't like the Walls were going to budge to make room for expansion, so the overpopulation just got worse and worse. People littered the streets, sleeping on corners or in alleyways or literally any other surface they could fit on. The combination of hungry, tired, cold people and desperation meant that unless you were constantly on guard, you were bound to be shanked at one point or another.

In short, there was no order or law or predictability. There were no constants in the concrete jungle except, perhaps, for the execution squares spread evenly across the slums, manned by guards who made an example of people with daily floggings or murders. The entire ring would have been one massive, endless, district of disorder if not for the 4 small sectors that divided the slums into quarters.

To the northeast was the farm district, full of golden fields and towering fruit trees. It was heavily patrolled, of course, to prevent the starving from snagging anything to fill their stomachs. Fruit was a delicacy only for the rich. Tommy had done a lot of jobs there.

On the opposite side of the city was the factory district, which clogged the air and the people with thick, gray smoke.

To the southeast was the guard training sector, which Tommy avoided like the plague, and opposite of that, in the northwest was the Haven, a small street of lavish mansions that sat on the sides of the river that snaked through the center of the city.

Tommy, living smack in the middle of the Eastside, was directly between the farm district and guard district. Because the increased guard presence was *exactly* what he needed.

So that was it. Tommy's entire world. With the massive stone walls towering around the city, it wasn't like there was much else.

At the very center of it all was Schlatt's sprawling quartz mansion, surrounded by a festival square. Tommy had never dared to get close enough to catch a glimpse. The place was crawling with security--not just guards, but also with heat cameras, search drones, and crawlers. That was the one type of job he would never take, and trust him, people had tried to get him to take it before. Tommy may have been a bit of an adrenaline junkie and he was a certified risk-taker, but he wasn't suicidal.

For this trip though, all he needed to do was run to the edge of the Eastside slums, an easy trip as long as he didn't run into any of the patrol bots. It was why he worked with the Feral gang so often. Easy commute.

Tommy vaulted over a chimney, his cloak waving behind him as he soared across the rooftops, little more than a dark blur in the night sky. Not a minute later, he skidded to a stop, perching himself on the corner of the current rooftop and peering at the streets below.

He could see the drop off site down by the building across from him--an innocuous trash bin sitting in an alleyway. Tommy inspected the area, searching for anyone who might try to intercept him or catch a glimpse of his appearance. He had worked with the Feral gang plenty before and they'd never crossed him, but it wouldn't be the first time someone had tried to build up his trust only to double cross him. You could never be too careful.

Tommy searched the windows of the surrounding buildings, looking for the telltale glint of a video recorder or night-vision goggles. His ears strained for any sign of a drone.

Nothing. The streets were eerily silent.

Tommy flew into action, launching himself over the side of the building and sliding gracefully down a drain pipe, slinking across the street silently. He reached the trash bin in an instant, sliding it open without so much as a single sound. It was empty save for a metallic gray and green card with a crown printed on it and a small, orange ribbon with a parcel attached.

Huh. That wasn't supposed to be there.

Tommy placed the microchip into the bin, careful not to damage the fragile technology, as he stared at the ribbon. Had he been compromised? The ribbon could be coated in a neurotoxin or some shit for all he knew. A bomb in the package maybe? Or what if it was some sort of incognito bot that would, like, come alive and wrap itself around his neck if he touched it? The smart thing to do would be to take the Primes and run. Tommy snatched the green card and tucked it into his pocket. He turned to leave.

And hesitated.

Ugh. He was too curious for his own good. He turned back and snatched up the little package in a flash, like it might not result in an excruciating death as long as he just grabbed it real quick. The package sat in his hands innocently.

Well. So far so good.

Tommy pulled the bright orange ribbon off, and the package fell open in his hands, revealing a small piece of paper and a small, shiny piece of metal. Tommy unfolded the small note.

*Nice job. Found something I thought you'd like.
Bet you've never seen a lighter before.
If you feel like committing some casual arson, I won't tattle.
Don't tell 404 about this, he thinks I'm a bad influence on you.*
-S

Tommy huffed a quiet laugh. Of course it was fucking Sapnap. Had he really resorted to bribery to recruit him? Tommy fiddled with the little piece of metal until he found the button, practically dropping the thing when a small flame spurted out from the top. Now this...could be useful. Tommy's eyes lit up with the possibilities.

Prime. If this was their way of bribing him, it was definitely working. Tommy gathered up his bounty, grinning in mischievous delight. Finally turning away, he disappeared into the night.

When he finally got home half an hour later, Tommy truly felt like death. The exhaustion of sprinting around, the fear from being chased by guards, the anxiety of being lost in the Underground all caught up to him. All he really wanted was to pass out and never wake up again.

Of course, it was his luck that as soon as he sluggishly pulled his door, the *bing* of an incoming message sounded from his laptop.

Great. Just great.

What now? What else could 404 possibly need from him?

Tommy threw himself onto his chair, opening his messages.

23:47

Philza: Heard you were the best thief in Pogtopia.

We have a job.

Regards,

The Antarctic Gang

Chapter End Notes

this chapter was a pain to write because all i want to do is write found family but i needed to add a little more world building first

never fear, next chapter we finally get our first taste of the sbi :))

Chapter 4

Tommy blinked once. Pinched himself. Blinked again.

The message glowed up at him. Tommy's eyes locked on its ending.

*Regards,
The Antarctic Gang.*

No. no no no NO.

This had to be some sort of sick joke. Someone thought they could pull a fast one or get an easy favor or intimidate him or *something*--except no, that wasn't possible because this was *the* Antarctic Gang, a name mired in bloody devastation and whispers of death, and someone dumb enough to imitate them would be long dead by now. The gang was little more than whispers in the wind, a legendary criminal empire from the Underground that most didn't even believe actually existed. No one knew its leaders, no one knew its location, and no one could pinpoint exactly what crimes they were involved in, but every major player in the Underground had heard the stories of the mysterious organization that slaughtered everyone who stood in their way. Stories of entire rooms filled to the brim with the blood of their enemies, of entire gangs disappearing within minutes. They were the boogie-men of the Underground. Unexplained disappearance? You had offended someone in the gang. Mysteriously poisoned? Maybe you shouldn't have opened your mouth about their secrets. Sure, maybe half the incidents attributed to the gang were rumors or false blame, but it didn't stop the aura of power and fear and mystery that surrounded them. They were legends. Nightmares. Only the brave and the stupid dared to even speak their name. Prime, Tommy only knew of their existence from one of his few trips to the middle levels of the Underground, and even then the name had been whispered with paralyzing fear, like the gang was listening in to every word.

Tommy clenched his eyes shut. He had to be dreaming. This- this was the exhaustion of everything or he was sick or he was hallucinating because this *wasn't possible*. Tommy opened a single eye.

The Antarctic Gang

Tommy shoved himself backwards, scrambling to get anywhere that was away. His eyes refused to tear away from the screen, from those last three words still taunting him, laughing at him. His feet caught. Tommy stumbled.

And suddenly he was falling, backwards, his eyes finally torn from that screen. For a second, he was weightless. He was flying.

And then a sharp pain pierced the back of his skull and Tommy was gone.

Tommy's eyes flickered open. Someone was pounding on his door.

"Tommy? You in there? I know you like your privacy but you weren't at the bakery this morning and Bad is getting worried, so you better open this door, kid."

Tommy groaned, rolling off of his back and onto his knees. How exactly had he gotten onto the floor again? His mind struggled to remember, a sharp pain pulsing on the back of his head. He reached up to touch it, and his hair felt sticky.

Oh. Everything came rushing back. Tommy refused to look at his still-open laptop.

“Tommy.” A dry voice from right outside his door.

Right.

“Just a sec, man!” Tommy called, wincing at how hoarse his voice sounded. He pushed himself to his feet shakily, the room spinning as he shuffled over to the thick metal door. Every step caused another jolt of pain to shoot through his skull. After what felt like an eternity, he finally reached the door, schooling his features into an expression that hopefully wasn’t one of pain. He pulled it open with a grunt.

“You look like shit.” The man wore a bright blue hoodie, waves of long, dark hair peeking out from its hood. Tommy glared at the man and he winced. “Okay, harsh, I get it. You look...messed up?”

Dark eyes scanned the boy, lips tilting downward as they landed on the bruises on his arms and the bags under his eyes. Tommy tried to give Skeppy a small, reassuring smile, although from the way the man frowned it must have come out more like a grimace. Skeppy hesitated for a moment longer, and Tommy could see the debate raging in his eyes: should he even ask?

In the end he must have decided against it, because he turned away with a sigh. “Just...come down to the shop when you get the chance, kid? You know how Bad is. Total mother hen.”

Skeppy had certainly played his cards right. Bad was terrifying when he got worried. Mother hen wasn’t even close--Bad was a force of nature whenever Tommy went AWOL. So half an hour later, Tommy was in the bakery, sitting in a corner booth and watching Bad rush to help customers.

For a few quiet moments, Tommy stared out the windows to the street beyond.

“Tommy! Haven’t seen you around the shop in a while. Where have you been?” Tommy jumped about a foot in the air, his head pulsing as his head whipped around. The tense set of his shoulders didn’t loosen until his mind finally registered that it was Bad. He hadn’t even noticed him approach the table.

“You know.” Tommy said evasively, “Around.”

“Well,” Bad sighed, “You’re always welcome to visit us! It’s hard to believe but we do actually enjoy your company. And we’re literally 100 feet away. Complete accessibility.” He reached over and patted Tommy’s head like he was a child, his hand landing directly on his head injury. Bad froze. Tommy winced. He really did have the worst luck.

“Tommy, what did you do?!” Bad screeched, fingers prodding the back of Tommy’s head. “You’re *bleeding*.”

“So? Nothing I haven’t dealt with before. A little blood won’t hurt me.” Tommy grumbled.

“Yes it will!” Bad sounded like he was about to have a minor stroke, “That’s the literal definition of bleeding you muffin!”

Tommy wasn’t really sure whether the whole muffin thing was because Bad owned a bakery or if he was just insane. He had asked once and Skeppy had glared at him like he was considering homicide. Tommy didn’t question it after that.

“I really don’t need any help, Bad. I’m perfectly fine.” Tommy grunted, his head resting in his arms.

Bad hesitated for a second, “Are you sure?” Tommy nodded. If he had known they would just fuss over his little head injury he would’ve just stayed in his room.

“No, he’s an idiot. Don’t listen to him, Bad, the child needs to get cleaned up.” Skeppy snipped.

Tommy lifted his head enough to glare at the man. “Who are you calling child, dickhead? I’ll fuckin’ show you, come fight me right no-”

Skeppy poked the bump on his head. Tommy froze mid-sentence, paling. Skeppy raised an eyebrow. Fine. He won this round.

“I’ll go grab some bandages!” Bad chirped, heading to the back of the store.

Skeppy followed, retreating to the countertop of the store, pulling Bad into a whispered conversation when he returned from the back room. The bandages Bad had gone to retrieve sat forgotten on the countertop, and Tommy knew it was only a matter of time before the two started to mess with each other and laugh and get all happy and shit and no way was Tommy third wheeling for that. This was his cue to leave. He scrambled out of the booth, ignoring the way his head throbbed at the motion, the sticky liquid he could feel running through his hair again. He probably could actually have used that bandage. Too late now. No way was he going to cry to them about it, not when they had so obviously already forgotten the injury.

“Well, I think I’ll be off now.” Tommy announced as he turned to leave, “I’m a busy man y’know. Got things to do, women to woo, other epic things.” Bad and Skeppy finally seemed to notice that he was still there, tearing themselves away from their conversation to glance over at him.

“Don’t get into too much trouble out there, kid.” Skeppy grinned at him.

“Take care of yourself, Tommy!” Bad gave him a soft smile and a little wave of goodbye.

Tommy fought the urge to smile back. *Temporary*, he reminded himself, *Conditional. A kind front*.

Tommy wasn’t dumb. He knew the score.

Bad and Skeppy let him stay because it was a mutually beneficial arrangement: Tommy got his little refuge from the streets, they got help around the shop and some Primes he slipped them to help keep the bakery afloat. So yeah, they put up with Tommy and all his shit. Sometimes they even put on the facade of caring.

But in the end, all of them knew. Tommy was second fiddle. He always would be.

The second his presence ever caused Bad danger, Skeppy would kick him to the curb. No hesitation. And vice versa: Bad would certainly be nicer about it, but the result would be the same. He would be out on the streets again.

Tommy didn’t fear death. What did he have to lose? No one would notice he was even gone, and frankly, even if they did they would get over in a matter of weeks, days even. Kids disappeared from the streets every day. It was just a fact of life.

So no, Tommy wasn’t afraid of dying.

But the people on those streets could do -- *had* done -- things much worse than death. And once they were done with him Tommy would have nothing, and he would fade away in an alleyway or a street corner. Relenting to the tides of death.

And if there was one thing Tommy hated, it was relenting. If he went, he was going on his own terms. If-- *when*-- he inevitably got into trouble and was cast into the streets, he would handle it. He could deal.

He left without looking back.

Back in his room, Tommy threw himself into his chair. He stared at his computer hopelessly, sighing.

Well, there was no getting around it.

Reluctantly, he opened his computer, and read the message.

Heard you were the best thief in Pogtopia.

We have a job.

Regards,

The Antarctic Gang

Tommy's eyes caught on the first line. It wasn't exactly wrong, to be fair, but he had mostly gotten the title of 'best thief in Pogtopia' by default.

Thievery was one of the most dangerous criminal roles of the Underground. It was just too...hands on. Too involved for most. They would all rather hide in their caves and tunnels below the surface than get into the nitty-gritty work on the topside. And even if there were a few others willing to get their hands dirty, they were either massive organizations with high-level connections or individuals who had signed off their loyalty to a gang. The pool of thieves-for-hire by nature wasn't exactly a competitive market.

The rest of his rivals had lost out to him simply due to an absence of gusto, for lack of a better word. It wasn't like Tommy was some sort of vigilante extraordinaire. He wasn't anywhere near stealthy, was far from agile, and had never fired a gun in his life, but he was smart and fast and determined, and that had always been enough.

Anyone could tackle the easy jobs well enough—the simple pickpocketing, factory district supply runs—but when the stakes got high and the job more complicated, most people tended to value their lives over the Primes or the recognition they might receive. Most people dropped out, eventually.

Tommy was not one of those people.

As long as a job didn't cross any lines, Tommy took it. And any job Tommy took, he got done.

No exceptions.

And sure, there had been a few situations over the years where Tommy hadn't been sure whether he would make it out in one piece, but that was the cost if he ever wanted to be something more than a faceless orphan in the streets. So yeah, he took every job. Frankly, the reputation was good for business.

It wasn't like anyone would miss him if he was gone.

And anyway, Tommy was at his best in the middle of danger. He always had a good head on his shoulders and lightning-fast reflexes, but once the adrenaline got to pumping every instinct seemed to amplify tenfold. Suddenly, he was unstoppable. A ball of energy and raw, animal, survival reflexes.

Really, he wasn't the greatest thief. He was just the most stubborn.

So normally there wouldn't even be a decision to make. The job would be his. But for *this* job, for *this* client...

Working with them would put a target on the back of everyone associated with him. Bad and Skeppy would certainly kick him out if they discovered his involvement with the gang. And that would definitely suck.

But on the other hand...this was the Antarctic Gang. They probably didn't take too kindly to being ignored. He didn't miss how the message had been worded as a certainty rather than a question. And so gravely insulting the gang... well, whatever they did to him would probably suck too.

Not to mention his reputation as Theseus would be absolutely destroyed if anyone ever found out that he had turned down such a prestigious client.

And, let's be real, the odds of Bad and Skeppy figuring everything out was practically nonexistent. The two made a point not to question where Tommy's funds came from, and Tommy never had and never would tell them about his identity. The job probably wouldn't even get in their way at all...

Was he really about to do this?

So much, *so impossibly much*, could go wrong.

Interacting with the most dangerous people in the Underground. Doing the job itself, which would be a nightmare if the gang needed to call *him* in. Not to mention, the high chance they would kill him at the end of the partnership anyway.

Tommy felt his blood begin to thrum in his veins, pounding like it always did when he was about to do something dangerous.

The Antarctic Gang would have every advantage over him. Their power was unfathomable, their resources limitless. Tommy was nothing.

It was going to be *so* fun when Tommy beat them at their own game.

Tommy grinned. It was a threat. A promise.

It was time to visit Sam.

Sam's workshop was Tommy's favorite place in all of Manberg.

The shop had been little more than a hole in the ground, formerly a dark, musty basement under a butcher's shop, but when Sam had arrived it had transformed into a wonderland of weaponry and fire. Sam was an inventor, a mechanic, and a genius one at that.

The man always needed to have his hands busy--Tommy didn't think that he had ever seen the man take a break, much less actually sleep, which meant no matter how popular his business got, the shop was always filled to the brim with new gear.

Scrap metal twinkled along the walls like bronze stars. The heat of the machinery made the shop feel like a warm summer's night. Every visit was full of experiments with the new machinery --grappling hooks, massive scythes, throwing knives, everything you could ever dream of. Sam couldn't afford to give it all away to Tommy of course, but he had anointed Tommy his official test dummy (*emphasis on the dummy*, Sam liked to say), and every now and again he would gift Tommy one of his creations. Tommy's staff, his weapon of choice, had been a gift from the man, who had somehow crafted the thin rod of metal into a masterful piece of weaponry; now it was compressible to the size of his fist, lightweight, and had a set of buttons on the side of the handle that electrified the end. All of this, from one bulky metal pole. Sam wasn't just a mechanic. He was an artist.

And like every good artist, Sam was mysterious.

He absolutely despised talking about himself, for one, especially about his past. Over the half a decade Tommy had known him, he had hardly gotten a word from Sam about his life before the workshop, though Tommy figured he had once been a member of the Underground, because every so often when Tommy tried to nudge their conversations in the direction of criminal activities Sam instantly paled, scrambling to change the topic. It was never much longer after that until the conversation would invariably end, Sam finding an

excuse to rush the boy out of his shop like he thought even mentioning the Underground would bring trouble to his doorstep.

Tommy, uncharacteristically, never pushed it. Everything about Sam, from the burn scars covering his lean arms to the man's unusually cunning gaze, to the way his gray eyes lingered on the golden crown on the corner of his desk, it all screamed of someone who was, or had once been, something dangerous. Powerful. So maybe it was self-preservation or maybe it was because Tommy knew the feeling of hiding your identity, but he never pressed. In return, Sam never asked why Tommy cared so much about his time in the Underground. It was their show of respect, of understanding, an unspoken agreement. One that Tommy was about to break.

He approached the back of the shop where he knew he would find Sam's workbench. The man didn't notice him approach over the blowtorch in his hand.

"Sam Nook!" Tommy shouted, his voice easily overpowering the sound of the tool. Sam powered down the tool, pulling his welding mask over his bright green hair and glancing over at the kid.

"Hey, Tommy, how are you? Heard you had screwed up your head. How did that happen?" Tommy blanched. The question sounded casual enough, but knowing Sam... Tommy peeked over at him. The mechanic was glancing at Tommy from the corner of his eye, his hands fiddling with a piece of scrap metal on his worktable to put up a guise of disinterest.

"Wow, word sure does travel fast around these parts, huh?" Tommy quipped, hoping Sam wouldn't notice that he had completely dodged the question.

"Bad mentioned it. He stopped by earlier for a new oven part, talked about Skeppy's antics for a while." Sam sighed exasperatedly. "For a *long* while. Like usual."

Tommy saw the opening. Now, it wasn't that he didn't trust Sam enough to tell him about his injuries. The man had helped him out of tricky spots more than once. Half of the furniture in his room was unsold items from the shop that Sam had gifted him. Despite everything left unsaid, the two had somewhat of a fragile friendship, and that was worth a lot in the East Side. So it was less of a trust issue and more an issue of appearances: Sam, Skeppy-- the whole lot of them, really -- all seemed to be under some sort of impression that he was weak and defenseless and needed them to help him get by. Under the impression that he cared.

Which was just absolute *shit*, because Tommy was running a criminal enterprise by himself, surely he could handle basic tasks of life without them hovering over him at every single turn. He wasn't weak. Far from it. He was fucking *epic*.

Except the more he insisted, the less they seemed to believe him. The last thing he needed was to prove them right by whining about a little bump on his head.

So when Sam mentioned Skeppy's pranks, Tommy pounced on the first sign of an escape route from this conversation.

"Skeppy?! Doing pranks again? Man, you shoulda heard him earlier, he gave me this big speech about how he was givin' up his old ways. Said he was gonna try to...uh, turn over a new book or something? What did he do now, big man? Indulge me. Tell me all about this. I want every detail, Sam, every detail." Tommy grinned. He ached that. He was so epic.

"Actually, Tommy," Sam turned to look Tommy in the eyes. Tommy swallowed. "I was *really* hoping we could talk more about this head injury business."

Fuck. Tommy circled back. Time for strategy number two: baseless accusation.

“Honestly, Sam, not gonna lie, you’re wayyyy too invested in this. Need I remind you; I am a minor.” Sam arched an eyebrow. Tommy continued unaffected. “Pretty weirdchamp, if you ask me.”

Sam pinched his brow, sighing. “Weirdchamp. Another one of your made-up words, I presume?”

Tommy sputtered indignantly. “Excuse me? I think I’m just better at words than you Sam Nook. No need to be jealous. Not all of us can be poets. Now, about Skeppy?”

Sam sighed again. Was there some sort of issue with his lungs or something? He should probably get that checked out. “I’ll let you off the hook for now Tommy, but believe me, we will be coming back to the conversation about your recklessness. Now. What brings you to the shop?”

Tommy grinned at the admission of defeat, his eyes sparkling, and the corner of Sam’s mouth lifted imperceptibly.

“You know, nothing much, just coming around to see my very favorite mechanic in all of Manberg, who is so incredibly amazing and knows everything ever and gets tons of women. Just tons. They flock to him in droves. He can’t handle it, he just drowns i--”

“Tommy.” Sam looked mildly amused, “What do you want.”

Tommy’s grin dimmed just a little.

“So, uh, you see Sam, I have this friend.” Tommy fidgeted with his hands, “And he’s a real great guy y’know? Super powerful and strong and nice and all that. But he may be, uh, involved with some *interesting* circles.” Sam’s face shuttered.

“Tommy-” he started, but Tommy wasn’t going to just sit here and get shut down this time. Not today, not for this. His words rushed out.

“I know you don’t like to talk about it, I really do Sam, but if just this once you could do this for me -- for my friend, I mean --Sam, it would help so so much, really just-” Tommy realized he was rambling, realized the storm that was forming in Sam’s eyes, and flushed. “What is the Antarctic Gang, Sam?”

Sam froze. The scrap metal clattered to the floor.

“Tommy.” Sam said, and his voice was ice. “Where did you hear that name?”

Tommy’s lips clamped shut. Sam stood. He was only an inch taller than Tommy, but in the dim light he seemed to tower over than him.

“Tommy.” Sam repeated, and the shadows on the walls grew deeper. He took a step closer to the boy. “Tell me now kid, *where did you hear that name?*”

Tommy froze. He had expected some resistance, a little hesitation but...honestly, Tommy had thought Sam would relent. Sit him down, provide him whatever information he had picked up, maybe give his usual speech about responsibility. Not...*this*. Not a voice that promised blood and devastation and the stifling aura of power that flowed through the room. Not this intensity. Tommy felt something akin to paralyzing fear bubble up in his chest, which was ridiculous because Tommy Innett didn’t get scared, and this was *Sam* we were talking about. Except this wasn’t Sam anymore, because his Sam was the calm to Tommy’s storm, tranquil and controlled even through all of Tommy’s antics. His Sam had never so much as raised his voice at Tommy. The man before him now was someone different.

“Tommy. *Tommy*. For Prime’s sake, *look at me!*” Sam yelled, and Tommy’s entire body flinched. His eyes snapped up to Sam’s instinctually. “You stay away from them. Do you hear me?! Whatever *shit* you’ve gotten into, you get yourself out of it and you get out of it fast and you don’t come back here until you do,

because I swear on every Prime in Manberg if you lead them to me that will be the last thing you do.” Sam’s voice was a hurricane, but his eyes were steely. Resolute. He meant every word.

Fuck this. He would go into the job blind.

Tommy fled.

Tommy sat down at his desk. He opened his computer. Maybe this was stupid. Maybe this was reckless. Sam’s warning echoed in his mind.

For just a moment, Tommy hesitated. Closed his eyes. Inhaled. Steeled himself.

When he opened his eyes, there was nothing but cold determination and sharp certainty.

17:09

Theseus: I’m listening.

The [read] indicator appeared below the message. Tommy held his breath. Waited.

A shrill ring screamed from the speakers. Tommy jumped a foot into the air.

[PHILZA is calling you...]

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Tommy gets a call from the Antarctic Gang

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy panicked. The cold determination from just seconds earlier fled in an instant.

What the--what the *fuck*? They weren't supposed to *call* him. He had assumed they would just message him like any normal person in the Underground.

Tommy *never* conducted business over a call. It was too spur of the moment, too risky. Tommy was rash and reckless and blunt, and frankly that didn't pair very well with high pressure business dealings that required tact and diplomacy. The last thing he needed was to offend a high-level drug lord by cussing them out. It was just easier to use messages, where he could check his impulsivity and filter out anything that might get him into trouble.

And then there was the issue of his voice. Tommy spoke a real big game about how powerful and manly he was, but in the end he was still just a teenager, and even he couldn't escape the clutches of puberty. Tommy was, to his horror, squeaky. His laugh was high pitched, his voice embarrassingly prone to cracking. It was horrible. Really undercut the whole big man thing.

Tommy *had* managed to rig up a voice modulator for emergency situations, but it was a massive pain to set up and even then, it was only able to add a few deeper undertones to his voice. Even a single outburst could still certainly expose his youth to someone perceptive enough.

So Tommy preferred to stick to typed communication, thank you very much. He just didn't do calls.

But he couldn't exactly reject *this* call, could he? Not after he had literally messaged the gang two minutes earlier. They knew he would be waiting for a response, knew he was sitting at the computer even now, and he was guessing they wouldn't take too kindly to being ignored after Tommy had waited an entire day to respond to their first message.

So he had to take the call. No biggie. He could handle this.

The computer let out another screeching ring. He had maybe about thirty seconds before the call was automatically rejected, and he doubted the gang would ever call him back if the first was so rudely disregarded. Everything needed to be ready before then.

Tommy burst into a flurry of motion. He checked the duct tape over his camera first--the browser's call system should have his camera off by default, but much better safe than sorry in times like this. He started loading the voice changer next, frantically starting up the program that would make his voice deeper.

By Prime, it was just starting to sink in that he was actually about to converse with *the* Antarctic gang. The timeless, fearless, gods of death who haunted the Underground. Criminals with so much blood on their hands they were probably stained red.

Fuck.

Oh fuck.

How in the world was he supposed to *actually* talk with these people like they were ordinary clients? He had prepared of course, but that had been meant for *messages*. Conversation was so much more tricky--the nuance of tone, the delicacy of delivery of every line. His entire plan had just been thrown out the window.

He didn't have time for this. He couldn't miss this call. He would just have to...improvise. On the most important deal of his life. Whatever.

Tommy hit the accept button.

The man's camera was *on*. That was the first thing that hit Tommy.

And--what sort of psychopaths *were* these people?

Voice calls were rare enough. Video calls? Unheard of.

Because why would somebody willingly expose their weaknesses to the enemy? Who would *want* to give the keys to their identity to a complete stranger like Tommy, and a known criminal at that? You would have to be insane.

And yet, here was the man, brown hair spilling over his face as he stared into the screen.

Tommy immediately disliked him.

He had a haughty sort of tilt to his nose that gave him the appearance of always looking down at you, and the sharp angles of his face only added to the effect. His complexion was pale and flawless, his eyes-- sharp, piercing, and cold --stared unwaveringly into the camera like he could make out Tommy through the screen and didn't like what he saw. It was a face made for smug smiles and arched eyebrows.

To put it bluntly, he looked like an arrogant prick.

"Theseus." The man greeted with a sharp nod, and, sure enough, there was that smug smirk Tommy had known would be there. "Sure took you long enough to answer."

For a split second, Tommy was confused. The man looked *way* too happy for someone who had almost been stood up by a possible business partner. For all his thoughts that the Antarctic gang were psychopaths, he didn't think they were *actually* insane--they never would have made it this far if they were--but something wasn't making sense with the man's actions. The gang were the ones who contacted *him*, not the other way around. Why would the man look so victorious to see Tommy almost miss the call?

Then there was the very fact that the man's camera was on in the first place. The gang was undoubtedly cunning, so why would they make the seemingly nonsensical decision to expose the face of one of their members? It just wasn't logical.

But maybe, Tommy thought, *maybe that's the point*.

This *wasn't* just any ordinary gang after all. Maybe this was their way of showing just how untouchable they really were. But that still wouldn't explain why the man seemed so happy at his late arrival. And anyway, would they really take such an unnecessary risk for a meaningless display of power? Was this some sort of intricate plan to scare him into compliance? If so, it was failing. All the call and camera had done was throw him off his game a little.

Unless...

Tommy came to two possible conclusions: either the man wanted him to fail, or this whole business of a call had been an elaborate scheme to get him on uncertain footing.

It wouldn't take much research, after all, to realize that Tommy only made deals through messages. A conversation with a past client or two and they would know everything about how Tommy liked to do business, what he was comfortable with. By forcing Tommy into this call, they knew they would push him into uncertain territory, that he would be vulnerable, and they planned to take total advantage of it. Tommy's carefully scripted messages would be scrapped and the gang would have total control over the conversation.

Something clicked into place in his mind. The pieces of the puzzle connected.

So that's why the bastard had been so smug, then. He knew Tommy had been caught off guard.

Those *assholes*.

Tommy seethed. These fuckers had the nerve to upend his life and then try to screw with him in the process?

Well, he would show them. He would be so cool and controlled they wouldn't know what had hit them. You don't mess with Tommy *fucking* Innett.

"Philza, I presume?" Tommy kept his voice carefully flat.

The man shook his head, "No."

Tommy waited for the inevitable introduction, but the man didn't continue. He just stared into the camera blankly. Waiting.

What the- were they *really* going to do this? Yet another power play. They clearly wanted to keep Tommy on the defensive, to make him feel inferior by having him practically beg for information. Another attempt to show that *they* were the ones in control by forcing *Tommy* to ask the clear follow up: *well who the fuck are you, then?*

Well, Tommy wasn't going to take the bait. They could just sit here until the asshole got down off his high horse and introduced himself.

They sat there in complete silence for ten seconds. Twenty. From somewhere off screen came the sound of a throat being cleared. The man's face twisted into a scowl.

"Wilbur," the man muttered, sounding like he wanted to punch something. Tommy, probably. "You may address me as Wilbur." Tommy's smile was victorious.

Tommy Innett -- I, Antarctic Gang -- 0.

"Pleasure." Tommy said, and he couldn't quite keep the snark from his tone. They sat for a moment in stifling silence: Tommy calculating his next move, Wilbur still glaring at the camera. Best to get this over with then. Wilbur was very clearly not going to be the bigger person and make the next move.

"Well then, *Wilbur*, your associate contacted me about a job. I'd like to know the details. Unless that's too high-level information for someone like yourself." Tommy grinned, "Which I would totally understand, of course. Every good organization needs some subordinates, someone to handle the busy work. But if you could just put me on with someone more, I dunno, *important*..."

Wilbur *shook* with rage. Tommy could see the icy fire in his eyes.

Tommy felt...glee. The man obviously wasn't used to being insulted so outright and seeing him driven to the brink of insanity over Tommy's snubs was the most fun he had gotten in a long while. The best part: Wilbur couldn't even fight back, not in such a professional setting. Tommy's statement could be seen as nothing

more than a mistake, an accidental offense, but if *Wilbur* said something...it would just be childish. Unprofessional. Weak. And Wilbur knew it. Tommy watched him simmer with amusement. The ball was in his court now. Time to see if he would match Tommy's nerve.

"Actually, I happen to know *all* of the details of this job." Wilbur said, his voice a mix of icy rage and something unrecognizable. "In fact, I will be your main point of contact for the foreseeable future."

The grin fell from Tommy's face.

"We'll have daily check-ins as well to update you on any new requirements for your jobs."

Fuck. *Fuck.*

So maybe it hadn't been the best idea to antagonize the man who was apparently his boss now. *Maybe* it hadn't been the best idea to try and get one over on the most powerful gang in the city in the first place.

Wilbur didn't seem like the type of person who just let bygones be bygones, judging by the way he was still glaring at Tommy with homicidal rage. And given that he was now Tommy's only point of contact in this deal...his life was about to become a literal hell.

This was the entire reason he only used messages.

Tommy swallowed. "Oh."

But Wilbur wasn't done. "We will also need you to turn on your camera before we go any further. Standard business practice with the gang. A precaution. You understand."

Oh, so they were back to *this* now. Another power grab. A massive bluff too, because there was no fucking way everyone the gang worked with was willing to expose their face to the *power-hungry murderers* on the other side of the line. This was just Wilbur trying to hit Tommy while he was down. Another attempt to force Tommy to give in.

But as much as Tommy wanted to curse this Wilbur fellow out, both of them knew the importance of reputation. Maintaining a professional front was a necessary evil. So instead of outright insults, they both resorted to thinly veiled attacks behind a front of diplomacy.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible." Translation: *no way in hell.*

"Well, it's quite important for our organization. Non-negotiable, really." Translation: *why the fuck not? Try me, I dare you.*

"Well, it's quite important for *me* that I keep the camera off. So I suppose we've reached an impasse." Translation: *Fuck you, that's why. Deal with it if you want to work with me.*

Wilbur seemed to sag for a second, "We'll...come back to that point, I suppose."

And that was how Tommy knew he had them. Nobody would've put up with his shit until now unless they really, truly needed help. The Antarctic gang...they were desperate.

Their futile power grabs had been a ploy all along. They were trying to keep him in control, keep him from realizing the truth. They needed him.

"What exactly is the job then, Wilbur?" Tommy asked, "You never got around to mentioning what exactly a powerful organization such as yourself would need little old me for."

"Unfortunately," Wilbur said, "I'm not at liberty to tell you the details of the jobs until we actually need you to pull them off. You'll get the details a night or two before each theft."

And wasn't that just the *biggest* red flag Tommy had ever seen. They wanted him to go in unprepared? Did they think he had a death wish? Jobs took days and days of surveillance and careful planning: plotting out guard routes, finding camera blind spots, retrieving employee schedules to find when the target would be empty. The whole process was delicate, complex. It needed to be if Tommy didn't want to be caught.

They hadn't even told him the nature of these jobs either, so Tommy had no idea whether they would violate his ground rules--this could be Wilbur's way of trapping Tommy into a contract and then ordering him to murder someone or some shit.

And look, he knew he had the upper hand right now. Making a deal would probably be to his benefit while the gang still needed him, but there was no way he would willingly sign himself over to them when he didn't have a clue what they really wanted him for. It was a deal breaker. He told them as much.

"So, let me get this straight, not only do you want me to give away all of the personal privacy I have by showing my face, you want me to do that while you give me *no* details about any of these so-called jobs you want me to work?" Tommy asked pointedly, "Will you tell me *anything*? The target, the dates, the purpose of all this?"

The call went silent.

"That's what I thought," Tommy said, "Well, Wilbur, this has been a wonderful conversation-- actually, you know what? That was a lie. Go fuck yourself. --but I'll be going now. We have nothing else to discuss. Deal's off." Tommy reached for the end call button.

"4000 Primes. Per job."

Tommy froze in his tracks. His jaw dropped. Four *thousand* Primes per job? That...that was a *lot* of cash. Four times his usual rate. With that sort of money, Tommy could- he could finally pay off-

Tommy cut his thoughts off. He could pay off his debts, was the point.

He had to accept. It would violate every rule he had ever set for himself, but it wasn't even a choice. He needed this. The pros outweighed the cons by far.

The gang wouldn't intentionally dispose of him, not while they still needed him, which meant that for now he would be safe with their presence. The pay was astronomical, the thing of fantasies, and once word got out that he was working with the gang, as it inevitably would, his business would skyrocket. After Tommy dealt with his...other monetary troubles...he would be set for life.

Talking to Wilbur would suck, but Tommy could deal with it for the number of Primes they were paying him. And if the gang tried to get rid of him after he was no longer useful? By then Tommy would have his trump card prepared. What could possibly go wrong?

Well. A lot, actually. Tommy was just easily swayed by the promise of Primes.

"Okay." Tommy said resolutely.

"Okay?" Wilbur sounded shocked, annoyed, angry, satisfied. His voice was a contradiction. "As in, yes? You'll accept?"

"That's what I said, wasn't it?" Tommy grumbled.

"Well then Theseus, tomorrow night we will go over the details of your first job. 21:00. Don't be late." Wilbur replied, and then added through gritted teeth, "I will look forward to talking with you then."

"I won't." Tommy said and ended the call. He watched as his screen went dark and leaned back in his chair.

So that had gone...surprisingly okay? The Antarctic gang were assholes, and Wilbur was a total bitch, but Tommy definitely had the upper hand here right?

And Tommy would make sure it would stay that way.

Because the gang had made a terrible miscalculation: they thought Tommy would be intimidated by their size, their power. They were wrong. To Tommy, it was an opportunity.

Every criminal empire had vulnerabilities. And for a gang as infamous as this one...he was sure there was someone in the Underground who knew what exactly those weaknesses were. He just had to find an in.

Luckily, Tommy had someone in mind. He grinned.

It was time to get some blackmail.

Chapter End Notes

it has been long awaited, and many promises have been broken in the process but...

HERE YOU GO MY DEVOTED READERS
YOUR FIRST TASTE OF SBI

i hope you enjoy
thank you for all of your wonderful comments, they actually make my day
(validation from strangers over the internet hooray)

next chapter should be out around Wednesday, so stay tuned!

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Tommy goes to visit a friend

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy was starting to think this might not have been such a good idea.

It wasn't that he was nervous, per say, and certainly not scared, because Tommy Innit was not a bitch, and only bitches got scared. He just...hadn't realized there would be quite so many people in the casino.

When he had formulated this plan not six hours ago the adrenaline had still been pumping from his call with the gang, his blood sparking with wild electricity, and he might have overlooked the small fact that Quackity's casino was an actual business with actual customers.

Admittedly, he may have made the mistake because he had been a *tiny* bit overexcited at the thought of getting dirt on Wilbur the Bitch. He hadn't even considered that the timing of his visit to Quackity might make a huge difference. In his mind, the casino would still be the silent, cavernous wonderland from when he had first stumbled on it two days ago. Clearly, he was wrong.

The peaceful shop had transformed into a whirl of blinding colors and noise. Neon lights flashed from every direction from gambling machines, a live band strummed a poppy tune with way too much bass, and patrons dressed in sparkling, vibrant outfits crowded card tables and literally every other inch of free space in the hall, laughing, dancing, and drinking.

How the *hell* was he supposed to find Quackity in this mess?

He could try to wait out the crowds, he supposed. Surely all of the party-goers would clear out eventually, right? His eyes landed on a clock amidst the flashing lights. It glowed 0224 in neon pink.

Well shit.

It'd be at least another few hours at least until the crowd had thinned out even remotely, and no way was Tommy going to sit behind the bar for that long and just *wait*.

So that left option two: find his way through the horde.

He was sure Quackity was in there *somewhere*. No sane businessman would leave a crowd this intoxicated in their shop without trusted supervision, and given the way the man had first introduced himself to Tommy with a knife to his throat, Tommy didn't think that Quackity was the trusting type. Especially not with the casino, his pride and joy.

The man was sure to be patrolling the gambling floor or sitting somewhere he could overlook the crowds. Like a king over his very rich, very drunk, subjects.

If Tommy could find somewhere with a good vantage point, he'd probably be able to spot that dumb beanie in the crowd, right? The stage, maybe? He could perch on the side of the platform so he wouldn't draw

attention and look for Quackity from there.

Okay, that was settled then. Now the hard part: actually getting through the crowd. These people were...rich. Very evidently so. If their flowing, elegant clothes hadn't given them away, the jewels would have. Because, oh Prime, there were *so* many jewels. As if the flashing lights weren't already enough to disorient him, now he had to deal with them glittering in his eyes every direction he turned?

It didn't help that Tommy physically *ached* to snatch some of them. He couldn't help it, honestly. The urge to pickpocket was just ingrained in him at this point. And honestly, would these people ever even notice if a bracelet or two disappeared? For them it was just something sparkly to decorate themselves with, for him it would be dinner for a month.

But Quackity would probably legitimately shank him if he found out Tommy was pickpocketing his patrons, and Tommy *really* wanted to stay under the radar when he tried this. The people of the Lights...let's just say they didn't look too kindly on people from the slums being anywhere near them. They had a very out of sight, out of mind way of thinking. And when someone messed up that perfect vision of the city? It did *not* go well.

But therein lied the problem, didn't it? Tommy was the living embodiment of East Side, of everything these people hated. He stood out like a sore thumb.

He would just have to keep his head down and hope everyone in the horde was too inebriated to notice that they had an imposter in their midst.

He could do that, surely? Keep his head down?

Tommy hesitated. Right?

Well, you never know if you never try. Tommy plunged into the crowd.

And, by Prime, these people had *no* sense of personal space. How did they even *breathe* so close to each other? Every single person he scooted past somehow managed to elbow him or shove him until Tommy felt like one giant bruise.

He was crawling through a jungle of tanned legs and glittery dresses and pressed suits and it *never ended*.

Was he making any progress? Tommy stopped and stood on his toes to try and spot the stage above the crowd. Had he gotten closer? It was entirely possible that he was just traveling in circles through the maze of people.

No, out of the corner of his eye, there was the band's setup. He was definitely closer now: He could see the glint of light off the lead singer's guitar. Just a few more minutes of worming his way through the tide of people and he would be there. He just had to keep his head down and no one would even notice--

Tommy jostled someone. Hard.

The man looked up from the gambling table he was standing at and Tommy realized with a jolt that he was definitely in Tommy's least favorite category of rich people: the *bow before me or I will make your life miserable* category. He was wearing a monocle for Prime's sake. A *monocle*. Who *did* that?

If that didn't give him away as a total jerk the rest of his outfit would have--the pressed suit, the cropped haircut, the annoyed scowl currently being directed at Tommy--

Oh shit. Time to go.

Tommy scrambled backward, hoping that if he could just get out of the man's cold gaze he would decide Tommy wasn't worth the trouble.

He wasn't quick enough.

The man's hand latched onto his arm. Alarm bells rang out in Tommy's head.

"Uh, so sorry sir, totally my fault mister, " Tommy forced out, "I do have to be going now though, so." He tried to take a small step towards escape, subtly testing the man's grip on his arm, and winced. This was definitely going to leave a bruise.

The man wouldn't budge. The grip on Tommy's arm only tightened. Tommy felt his breathing hitch.

"Uh." Tommy said intelligently. His mind panicked, narrowed down, until the only thing he could feel was the fingers on him, on his arm.

"Hold up there," the man drawled, and Tommy was still above the haze of panic enough to realize that he *really* didn't like the grin that had spread across the man's face. "What do we have here? Another serving boy? Where's your owner, boy?"

What the fuck? *Serving boy?*

Tommy felt a little sick. What exactly did these people think he was? What exactly did Light's citizens do to the lower classes in the depths of the Underground?

Forget Quackity. He wanted to leave, and he wanted to leave now.

"Hey," the man growled, and suddenly there was sharp pain in his right cheek. "I was talking to you *boy*."

He yanked Tommy by his arm, and Tommy couldn't help but yelp, which only made the man angrier. "Quiet!"

And really, Tommy was *trying* to stay quiet, *knew* that the crowd nearby had begun to stare, but all he could feel was the pain in his cheek and the cruel glint in the man's eyes and he wanted to be *away*.

The crowd was pressing even closer, too close, and there was a pressure in his chest and the only thing in his mind was the blood pounding in his ears. Everything was too close, too much, and the man was still touching him--

Raw instinct took over.

Tommy turned his head and, in one swift motion, bit the man.

The man released him with a strangled scream, hand falling away as he clutched his wrist to his chest in shock.

Tommy froze. He tasted blood.

And then it hit him that this was his chance, and he turned to get the *fuck* out of this place, because why did he ever think he would be able to do this in the first place, and--

As he turned to go, someone caught his shoulder. Panic descended.

The edges of Tommy's vision blurred and twisted, fading to black, and all the suffocating pressure came back with full force and he couldn't *breathe*. What the fuck, why couldn't he breathe? What the--

A voice cut through the panic, "Richard, what the fuck are you doing?"

The man, *Richard*, froze. Tommy looked up at him. The self-assured confidence from a second earlier was gone. His face had gone white as a sheet.

Tommy noticed with a start that business went on as usual throughout the casino, except everyone from the crowd of people once surrounding them had made a point of carefully ignoring the conversation going on.

"What, uh, what do you mean, sir?" Richard asked, looking like he was legitimately about to pass out from fear. Or piss himself. Or both.

"I *mean*, why the *fuck* are you giving a random kid a panic attack in the middle of my fine, *upstanding* establishment, *Richard*?" the voice said again, sounding extremely pissed and extremely familiar.

Tommy twisted to see his savior and caught sight of hard brown eyes staring pointedly at the hand on Tommy's shoulder.

Richard dropped Tommy unceremoniously.

"Sir, just, he's--" Richard stammered, looking lost and afraid. Tommy's savior tapped his foot impatiently.

"Well don't hold back on my account, Richard." Tommy said with as much confidence as he could muster, ignoring the way his voice shook.

Richard glanced down at Tommy with a look in his eyes like he was seriously about to strangle him.

"Don't even think about it." Quackity said, and hold up that hadn't quite sunk in yet. *Quackity*? Why the fuck did Richard look so *terrified*? This was *Quackity*, we were talking about. Five-foot three Quackity, guy who still wore that stupid beanie Quackity. Why was everyone so carefully avoiding him?

"He, he's a lower class, sir." Richard managed to get out, glancing down at Tommy with a look of distaste. "He had the *audacity* to *shove* me. I was just showing him his place."

A shadow fell over Quackity's face. "Showing him his place, huh? Interesting, coming from someone who wouldn't be able to afford the clothes on his back if he hadn't slept with the Treasurer's daughter. Should we show you your place too, then?"

Tommy didn't know how it was possible for Richard to pale further, but he did, glancing around at the casino patrons surrounding them who were still pretending they weren't eavesdropping.

"It won't happen again, sir." Richard mumbled.

"You're damn right it won't," Quackity said, "Get out." He held out a hand and helped Tommy stand up. "And don't come back."

Quackity turned and began leading Tommy away, clearly signaling the end of the conversation, and the crowd parted around him.

Tommy turned for one last look at the man. Richard was still frozen in shock, stammering, like he wasn't sure how this had just happened.

Tommy stuck his tongue out and flipped him the bird.

As soon as Quackity had pulled Tommy into one of the back rooms he turned on him with fire in his eyes.

"What the fuck was that? Why are you here during the busiest time of night, you dumb fucking idiot, no scratch that, why are you *here*? When I said you could come to me for help it was like, a symbolic gesture or some shit. I didn't mean *literally* come to me any time! *Why* would you think this was a good idea?"

Tommy stared at him.

Quackity's scowl got a fraction darker. "What part of *I want an explana-*"

"You're epic." Tommy was a little dazed, his eyes shining with something like awe.

Quackity froze. "The fuck?"

And Tommy couldn't hold it in anymore. "You were *amazing*, Big Q, you should have seen yourself. Oh Prime, fucking Richard just got *destroyed*. I swear he's probably pissin' himself right now. And here I was, thinking you were a total idiot 'cause of that dumb beanie, but no, you are epic. So epic." Tommy stopped to catch his breath, eyes glittering.

"Epic?" Quackity asked, looking a little confused and a lot overwhelmed.

"The most." Tommy said solemnly.

The tension fell from Quackity's shoulders, his arms falling from where they had been crossed against his chest, sighing. "I suppose I should've expected something like this to happen. And Richard was a dick. He had it coming. But kid, really, why would you think you could make it through that mess out there?"

"Because I'm the greatest thief in the Underground." Tommy chirped.

Quackity groaned, running a hand over his face. "Sure you are, kid. What exactly happened out there then, oh great and wonderful master thief?" Tommy's smile dimmed.

He must have still been shaken up from the incident or something, because he *knew* that he shouldn't reveal the moment of weakness to Quackity, but before he could stop himself his mouth was moving and everything came spilling out.

"I was just...I looked away for a second and suddenly he was *there* and he had my arm and he was talking all this *shit* about *serving boys* and I couldn't, I couldn't *breathe*, and-"

"That's enough," Quackity said, eyebrows pinching. "That's alright. Let's just. Move on. Why did you need me? I assume you're not here to play poker."

Tommy silently thanked Quackity for the change of topic. Maybe the Richard Incident had frazzled him more than he had thought.

Whatever. He didn't need to think about it anymore. Time to stop being a bitch. He needed to focus, needed to make sure that Quackity gave him the info that he required. The last thing he needed was a repeat of what had happened with Sam.

"So I have this job," Tommy started, "And you know me, always gotta be prepared-" Quackity snorted, "-so I was thinking, who do I know that probably has some information that could help me out, and then I thought, well my good friend Quackity is so extremely powerful and resourceful and also very kind, I'm sure he would help me out."

"Yeah, like flattery is gonna work on me." Quackity huffed, but he was smiling and it very clearly *was* working. "Sure, kid. What, you need me to find a good sweet shop from the mid-ring that you can steal from?"

"Actually," Tommy said, "I was wondering what you knew about the Antarctic gang?"

Silence.

Suddenly, Quackity laughed, more than a little hysterical. He looked up at the ceiling like he thought some vengeful god up there had cursed him.

Tommy stared at him. Was this considered a positive response?

“I should’ve *fucking* known!” Quackity screeched, “I should’ve fucking known that the one kid to fall in my lap would be a problem child.”

Tommy wanted to mention that he was far from a child, much less a problem one, but had the sense to realize it was probably not the time.

Quackity was still ranting. “*Of course*, he wants to know about the fucking *Antarctic gang*, because nothing can ever be easy for me, can it?!”

“So you know about them then!” Tommy exclaimed, “You can give me information on them!”

Tommy thought he was being a little dramatic, honestly. Let’s be real, Wilbur the Bitch hadn’t exactly been the most imposing opponent in their conversation. Like, sure they’re the most notorious gang in the Underground, but did Quackity *really* need to make that big of a deal out of it?

“No, I’m not going to fucking *give you information on them*, I don’t want to fucking die!” Quackity spun around to face Tommy, “What the *hell* are you doing with the Antarctic gang? You’re going to get yourself killed, kid!”

“I’m not a fucking kid, dickhead!” Tommy screeched, “Are you going to help me or not? Because I have plenty of other contacts down here, and I can just find some other crime boss to help me.”

It was a total lie. Quackity was really Tommy’s only shot, but the man very clearly had a superiority complex, and Tommy going to anybody else would certainly be a blow to his ego.

He saw the moment that Quackity caved. His face fell to something like resignation, the fight visibly draining from him, and Tommy knew he’d won.

Quackity sighed. “What do you need to know?”

Tommy, for once in his life, turned serious.

“Tell me everything.”

Hours later, Tommy was seriously considering banging his head into a wall.

“Just let me leave!” he yelled, trying to push Quackity out of the way so he could make his escape.

“No!” Quackity screamed back, standing in front of the heavy wood door, trying to keep Tommy from scratching out his eyes. “Just wait another hour! Prime, Tommy, it’s not that fucking long.”

Tommy threw his weight into the man’s side. He didn’t budge.

What the fuck? The man was like two feet tall, why couldn’t Tommy move him even a single inch? He wasn’t *that* weak.

“Tommy, I’m not letting you out until the crowd is gone. Just fucking give up, kid. Go sleep on the couch or something.” Quackity huffed, still standing his ground. Tommy, finally, stopped clinging to his legs, gave a petulant sigh, and threw himself onto the couch.

“This feels like kidnapping.” Tommy informed him, “I am a kid and you have napped me.”

“Mhm.” Quackity said, finally stepping away from his post guarding the door.

“I am going to call the authorities and inform them that there is a napper of kids in the city.” Tommy grumbled.

“You do that.” Quackity agreed. Tommy just groaned.

Ordinarily, he would be thrilled to spend his time in the presence of someone like Quackity. And he had been, six hours ago, when Quackity had started telling him what he knew about the Antarctic gang.

The majority of what Quackity had told him...to be honest it hadn't been very useful. More horror stories about acts of violence the gang had committed, the people who had been left slaughtered in their wake, stuff that Tommy had all heard before. Every now and then, though, he said something Tommy could actually use.

Like when he mentioned that the Antarctic gang had three leaders, but no one had ever seen any of their faces. That Wilbur the Bitch was one of these three leaders, and the only one whose name was actually known, because apparently Wilbur was responsible for handling all of the gang's business interactions. He was good at it too: the Charmer, Quackity had called him, a silver-tongued siren.

Tommy wasn't sure they were talking about the same guy.

What had confused Tommy more, though, was that Quackity never mentioned Philza, who Tommy assumed was one of the other leaders of the gang. Quackity seemed certain that Wilbur was the only leader to ever make contact with anyone.

So either Quackity didn't have accurate information, which Tommy doubted, or he was the first person to ever be contacted by this Philza guy.

Even more concerning was, according to Quackity, the gang refused to work with anybody. Sure, they would do the occasional trade deal for materials, but long-term alliances? Unheard of.

Which meant this fragile partnership they had with Tommy....

Either the gang had a massive change of heart, or this job was *dangerous*. Dangerous enough that no one in their organization could pull it off, dangerous enough that they were unwilling to risk one of their own.

Yay.

What exactly could he use the information for? Well, Tommy wasn't quite sure yet. His head was still spinning with it all.

But that was hours ago.

Now, it was almost 0900 and Tommy really just wanted to go back to his house and pass out. But no, he had to wait because *apparently* the casino was still full. Which honestly, didn't these people have *jobs*? Tommy tapped his feet against the ground. His leg jittered in place.

Quackity sighed, glancing at his watch. “You know what, Tommy. Close enough. Go ahead kid, you can go.”

Tommy jumped to his feet. “Really?”

Quackity just nodded and Tommy rushed over to the door, eager to get back and start figuring out his next move. As he opened the door, Quackity grabbed his wrist.

“Just...don't do anything stupid, Tommy.” he mumbled, looking down at Tommy intently.

“I...” Tommy chuckled nervously, “I won't Big Q. Never do.”

He lied.

Chapter End Notes

pov: i am evil and love torturing my readers
no sbi this time hahhahah >:)

next chapter.
2/4, but you'll have to take what I give you.

hope you enjoyed! thank you again for all the wonderful comments :))

next chapter should be out around sunday, maybe even earlier if I feel real epic

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Tommy gets his first job and also more pain

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy had always been good at picking out his targets.

Even in the first few days, all those years ago, he could always spot the weakest ones in the crowd, the ones who weren't perceptive enough to care about the grime-covered child in the shadows, who wouldn't give the kid a second glance as he brushed by them, except to maybe wrinkle their nose in disgust. Even then, Tommy could pick out the ones with money to spare, could spot the bulge of a wallet or the glitter of a bracelet from a hundred feet away.

He had always been good at picking out his targets, but for years he had been a horrible pickpocket.

It was his impulsiveness that was the issue. Pickpocketing had a certain art to it. The whole operation was a delicate dance--precise timing and calculated expressions, the flick of a wrist to slip a ring or bracelet or wallet into your hand.

It required patience. Something Tommy had always lacked.

So when the time came to actually steal something for the first time, Tommy had, predictably, rushed into it. The woman had seemed like such an easy target, decked out in jewelry and with that carefree look on her face, that Tommy hadn't even hesitated for a moment before he sprinted up and snatched her purse from her hands with all the grace of a feral raccoon. The woman screamed.

He hadn't watched. He hadn't listened. Because if he had he would have noticed the pair of guards turning the corner onto the street in the moment before he grabbed the purse.

But he hadn't, and in the end he had almost died for it. A little bit slower, and the guards would have caught him in an instant.

He didn't get much better in the attempts to come.

He supposed it was just his nature: he had the mind to plan, not execute. He could make connections, perceive vulnerabilities, formulate a foolproof course of action, but when the time came to actually carry it out, Tommy was always far too reckless. Far too willing to improvise.

But he was nothing if not stubborn. Nine years and far too many close calls later, Tommy had perfected his craft.

He sat in the shadows, curled in on himself, head hunched so you couldn't quite see his face. His hands fidgeted with the air. To an outsider he looked harmless. Yet another child, with a tragic but unavoidable fate. Not worth their time.

He was in the mid-ring shopping district today, one of his favorite hunting grounds. It was the perfect mix of people: enough Lights citizens that he could find the perfect target, but enough from the slums that another dirty child wouldn't stand out from the bunch.

Nobody gave him a second glance. Which was well enough, because it made it that much easier for Tommy to watch them. Men in charcoal suits, toting dark suitcases, women in flowing sundresses that swirled in the wind, families with skipping, laughing children, they all passed by without a thought his way. Like he didn't even exist.

But he did, and he watched. Waited.

And then he spotted her. The perfect target.

She had a soft smile, kind eyes, and an oblivious look like she didn't have a care in the world, like she couldn't see the poverty over the glitter of the trinkets in the store windows. Even better, she was practically glowing with all the jewelry on her person: a pearl necklace, dangling earrings, and best of all, arms covered with gold and silver bracelets.

She was walking close enough to his side of the street that he could stay hidden until she was right next to him, which would give him the element of surprise. Perfect. Tommy shuffled into the shadows of the building.

The woman strolled past, unaware of the boy that couldn't be more than a meter away, and Tommy lurched forward, grabbing her wrist. The woman staggered back in shock, her kind face contorting as her eyes landed on Tommy's grimy hands covering her manicured nails. She looked at him like he was something that had just crawled out of the sewer.

Which, honestly, *rude*. Like yeah, Tommy was very much about to steal from her, but *she* didn't know that. She could at least *pretend* she wasn't judging him based solely on his appearance. Not all lower-class citizens were thieves, lady, get with the times.

He was, though. So maybe she had a point.

Wait.

Holy shit, was *he* the problem? By pickpocketing had he been unintentionally furthering the perception that every impoverished citizen was a delinquent? Was he only feeding into another misguided stereotype? But how else could he survive in the slums? Should he simply be content with his mediocre existence and accept his cruel fate--

The lady tugged at his hand, trying to wiggle her fingers out of Tommy's grip.

Right. Theft. What had he been thinking about again?

Meh. Probably wasn't important. He had a woman to thief from.

The transformation was instant. Suddenly, he wasn't Tommy the dirty crime boy, he was Tommy the poor, hopeless orphan, just a too-skinny kid in a too-big world. He blinked up at the woman with wide, helpless, baby blue eyes, his grip on her wrist softening just slightly to give her the impression of fragility.

"Ma'am," he whispered, "Couldn't you spare a Prime, ma'am?" Tommy's eyes blinked rapidly like he was just barely holding back tears. He sniffled loudly.

He was really laying it on thick today, wasn't he?

But the woman didn't even hesitate before she wrenched her arm from Tommy's grip, storming off, glancing at the hand Tommy had grabbed in disgust, like she was trying to shake off Tommy's poor people germs.

Tommy felt significantly less bad about stealing her bracelet now.

He held up the tiny golden band between two fingers, inspecting the gemstones embedded into the metal. A fine piece of jewelry. It would get him a few dozen Primes at a scrap shop at the least.

But for now, it was time to go. Eventually, the woman would notice the missing bracelet. Being approached by a begging orphan was a common enough situation in the streets that Tommy's facade would buy him some time, but in the end it wouldn't take long after that first realization to put two and two together and connect the little beggar boy with the vanished jewelry. He needed to be long gone by the time she came back with a troop of patrol guards.

Tommy was lost to the maze of alleyways.

Tommy wasn't quite sure how he had ended up on the ground.

A second ago he had been running through the streets of the slums, savoring the way the wind rushed through his hair, hand gripping the stolen bracelet, and now he was eating dirt? Something wasn't adding up here.

He could've tripped, sure, but Tommy didn't just fucking *trip* like some sort of child. Gracefulness was a learned skill. He couldn't just be okay with clumsiness when he was pulling off heists every other week, now could he?

Tommy pushed himself onto his knees, wiping one arm across his face to try and get the mud out of his eyes. He glanced around the narrow street, looking for the culprit for his fall.

Nothing. Maybe he really had just lost his balance for once.

"You've been avoiding me, Tommy." a low, lilting voice said from behind him. Tommy froze.

Ah. That explained it.

And then Tommy was on the ground again, clutching his stomach as it sent sharp waves of pain through his body, struggling to breathe with the air knocked out of his chest. He gasped for air.

Tommy vaguely wondered whether the boots had steel toe, because there was *no way* an ordinary kick to the gut could hurt this fucking much.

He propped himself up on an arm, entire body shaking with the effort. His eyes rose to see that horrible, signature green jacket. Fingerless gloves covered the man's clenched hands.

"Tommy," Dream said again in a sing-song voice. His foot reared back for another kick and Tommy's eyes followed the motion and *oh fuck*, yep, those were *totally* steel toes. Stars burst in his eyes when the combat boot hit his chest. "I almost felt like you didn't want to see me. I almost--"

"No," Tommy coughed. The back of his hand came away red. "No Dream, I woul--"

His vision flashed white. He landed on his side.

"Don't." Dream demanded sharply, his gaze suddenly intense, the laughter gone from his voice, "Don't you dare interrupt me." He stood frozen, staring at Tommy, eyes wild and cunning and menacing all at once. Tommy didn't dare move.

And just as suddenly, it was like the switch had flipped back again, that taunting smile on Dream's face as he stage whispered to Tommy with exaggerated sulk, "It really hurt my feelings Tommy. I felt like you

didn't want to see me."

Tommy gritted his teeth. Really? He couldn't *imagine* what had given Dream that impression.

"Honestly," Dream continued, that singing lilt in his voice again, "It wasn't very nice of you. I think you owe me an apology."

Tommy stared up at him and wondered, not for the first time, what Dream's damage was.

Dream did not take the silence well. A combat boot landed on the middle of Tommy's back, shoving him face-first into the street for like, the fifth *fucking* time.

"I said, *apologize*." Dream growled, and Tommy could tell the switch had flipped again and he was back to sadistic asshole Dream instead of insane asshole Dream. His boot pressed down into Tommy's back, and *holy fuck* were there *heels* on these boots too because Prime that *hurt*.

Pride and self-preservation battled in Tommy's mind. Look, Tommy wasn't sorry. Dream was a massive dickhead, a constant presence looming over him, and Tommy wanted nothing more than to tell him to fuck off.

But Tommy had been in this situation enough to know what would happen if he ignored Dream's demands, and so, he relented.

"I'm sorry," Tommy forced himself to say, and Dream hesitated for just a second. Tommy blanched. "Dream! *Please*, I'm sorry."

And then the pressure was gone and a large hand lifted him to his feet, and suddenly Dream had become his third persona, one that Tommy found even more frightening than the other two: Friend Dream. Nice Dream. The Dream who smiled at Tommy with softness in his eyes, like he remembered a time when they were friends, who acted like he was the Old Dream. And Tommy knew that the Old Dream was gone, but when Dream smiled at him like that, sometimes a small, childish part of him hoped that the Old Dream was still in there somewhere.

Friend Dream dusted off Tommy's jacket as if he hadn't been the sole reason for it being covered in mud in the first place, throwing an arm over Tommy's shoulders like they were old pals. Tommy flinched, hard, but couldn't quite bring himself to shrug it off.

"I'm only looking out for you, Tommy. I only want what's best for you. You know that, right?" Dream smiled down at him, and Tommy wanted to shake his head, he really did, but he couldn't help but think back to all those years ago. To a time when Dream would drape his stupid green hoodie over Tommy's shoulders on rainy days and gift Tommy little trinkets he'd bought with stolen Primes and give him all of his extra blankets on cold nights. To a time when he was *Dream*.

Tommy gave a small nod. He looked up at Dream, ignoring the way his own eyes were a little glassy.

"Just 5,000 more, right? And then you'll give them back?" Tommy asked quietly, hopefully.

"Yeah, Tommy. 5,000 more and your debt will be paid." Dream assured, and hope bloomed in his chest.

He had been working to this for years now, spending every free Prime paying back this debt to Dream. Days going hungry, because he couldn't waste Primes on something as unimportant as nutrition, nights without sleep because he refused to buy real blankets, they would all be worth it after one more job. He would finally be out of Dream's clutches. For better or worse.

What would he even do, Tommy wondered, once he was free? What would he even buy with all of those Primes? A new pair of boots, ones he could run in without water getting through the holes in the leather? A laptop that didn't sound like a blender every time he started a call?

A shadow fell over his face and Tommy suddenly noticed just how low the sun had gotten over the Walls. If he waited any longer he was definitely going to be late to his stupid check in with Wilbur, and the last thing he needed was to give the man another reason to think he was an insolent piece of street trash.

Not that Tommy cared what Wilbur thought, of course. This was simply good business practice.

Tommy wriggled out from under Dream's arm. "Gotta run, Dream. Duty calls."

The edges of Dream's mouth turned downward. "Very well," he sighed reluctantly, "Run along then."

Tommy was already jogging, starting to pick up speed, because he *really* did not want to be late to this meeting and--

"Theseus."

Tommy faltered midstride, turning back towards Dream with wide eyes.

"Don't try to avoid me again. Ever."

Tommy blinked and Dream was gone, vanishing into the twilight shadows in a flash of green. Tommy stared at the spot where he'd stood.

The ghost of Dream's voice echoed through the alleyway. The threat had been clear.

Tommy barely made it back to East Side in time. Right as the clock hit 2100, Tommy threw open the door to his room, dashed to his laptop, turned on his voice changer, and pressed the call button.

Wilbur answered in an instant. His camera was on like the day before, which Tommy found a little strange. They had already played their little intimidation game, what was the point of using the camera again? Seeing the man with that unimpressed, snooty expression and glasses perched on the edge of his upturned nose really only worked to cement Tommy's view that Wilbur was an arrogant jerk.

"Theseus." Wilbur noted stonily, and Tommy guessed that meant the cold demeanor from the day before hadn't just been a fluke. Nope, Wilbur was a certified bitch.

The least he could do was *pretend* to be even remotely interested in this call. He was the one who had insisted they have these "check-ins" in the first place, after all.

But fine. Two could play at this game.

"Wilbur." Tommy greeted with the same uninterested tone, and although Wilbur's blank slate expression remained mostly unphased, Tommy noticed his eyebrows pinch together ever so slightly.

Ah. So Wilbur didn't like it so much when the attitude was turned back on him, huh? The man really was vain. Although maybe being one of the most powerful people in the known world did that to a person.

Tommy knew he really needed to try and remember Wilbur had the power to significantly shorten his lifespan. The man was wealthier and more powerful than Tommy could ever comprehend. It probably wasn't the best idea to be mouthing off to him.

He just had *such* a punchable face. And Tommy didn't exactly have the best impulse control.

Wilbur stared into the camera quietly for a moment, his eyes somewhere distant. An ordinary person might have thought he was considering something, taking a moment to think.

But Tommy was far better and smarter than an ordinary person, and so he concluded that Wilbur was once again trying to get some sort of reaction out of him.

For all of Tommy's considerable virtues, patience was not one of them. His restraint ran thin.

"Are we done here?" Tommy snapped, "This might be a new concept to you, but some of us actually got lives to live, dickhead. Why do we need to check in if you're just going to sit there and stare at me?"

Wilbur raised a single thin eyebrow.

"Today you get your first job." Wilbur retorted coldly, "I suppose you weren't listening when I mentioned that yesterday."

Tommy blinked. Yesterday? When had he mentioned that yesterday? That definitely was a *massive* fucking lie, because Tommy Innett never forgot--

A vague memory tickled the back of his mind. Oh. Well.

Tommy blamed Wilbur. He was a bitch. It was far too distracting.

Tommy coughed awkwardly. "Well yeah. Clearly that was a test." *Idiot*, he added silently.

"A test." Wilbur deadpanned.

"Yes." said Tommy, and clearly he had successfully outsmarted Wilbur the Idiot Bitch, because the man didn't say anything else about the matter. He just shook his head, glancing upward like he was thanking Prime. Or maybe cursing them.

"Well then," Wilbur muttered, "Since you're clearly very anxious--" Tommy flushed "--we'll get right into it I suppose."

Wilbur paused.

"Theseus, are you familiar with the parade that will be occurring one week from now?" Wilbur questioned, and a little bubble of uncertainty formed in Tommy's gut, because suddenly he really didn't like the direction this conversation was headed. Of course he *knew* about the parade--you would be hard pressed to find someone in Manburg who *didn't* know about Schlatt's annual birthday festival.

Schlatt could be called many things, but frugal was not one of them. The man went all out. It was the single biggest event of the entire year.

No expense was spared. The festivities drew nearly everyone from the Lights into Schlatt's Square, where the event was held. Even Schlatt came out of his mansion for once.

Unfortunately, that also meant that literally every guard in the city was patrolling the Square. The festival was more of a military parade than anything. So the feeling of unease growing in Tommy's chest was pretty understandable: Wilbur even mentioning the parade was not a good sign for what this job would entail.

He didn't like it, but no way he was going to let Wilbur know that. This was his first job with the gang, couldn't exactly back down now.

"Yeah," Tommy answered, "Who doesn't?"

Wilbur ignored him, nodding shortly.

"One week from now," Wilbur explained calmly, "You're going to crash that parade."

Tommy was expecting it, but he still couldn't help the wave of remorse that hit him.

Nobody from the lower classes were allowed into the event, but even in the dregs of East Side the festival was a time for celebration. For a single, glorious day the streets were free from guards and drones, all of them drawn away to the ceremony. The leftovers from Schlatt's feast kept the slums well fed for weeks. Best of all, the music from the live band echoed to the farthest reaches of the city, the whole way down to the Walls. People danced in the streets.

It was the one day of peace in East Side: everyone seemed to have an unspoken agreement just to enjoy the brief respite from Schlatt's crushing military presence. No muggings in the street, no stabbings in alleyways, people actually shared food with each other of their own free will...

Tommy thought it was all a little beautiful.

And he would miss it. Not just miss it, no, he would be trading it to travel into the most dangerous place in the city on the most dangerous day of the year. What a great way to spend his day.

"In the crowd there, you're going to find a man named Fundy," Wilbur informed him, and it was all Tommy could do not to gasp like a fish out of water.

"What?" Tommy blurted, face paling, mouth falling open, because there was no way Wilbur was being serious. "This some sort of joke?"

Wilbur's face betrayed nothing, his mouth set, eyes holding steady, but Tommy swore that he could see a hint of wild delight in that expression. He couldn't pinpoint what it was, exactly, that gave him the impression that Wilbur was *enjoying* this. Maybe it was the way the edges of his mouth kept twitching, like they were fighting to keep from breaking into a grin. Maybe it was the way Wilbur was drawing out this conversation, like he wanted to experience every second of Tommy's disbelief.

Maybe it was the way he was sending Tommy into a literal death trap and didn't seem concerned in the slightest.

Like really. *Fundy??* Tommy didn't even know what exactly Wilbur wanted him to do yet, but it could be nothing good if Fundy was going to be involved. He opened his mouth to reply with a resounding *hell no*, but then he thought of those new boots and Dream's taunts, and he remembered that no wasn't exactly an option here. So he stayed quiet.

Tommy convinced himself he would be fine. Whatever he had to do at that parade, he would handle it. The job couldn't possibly be that bad.

Of course, Wilbur had to open his mouth and ruin that.

"Fundy will be wearing a silver ring with a sapphire inlaid in it." Wilbur added, and maybe it was just Tommy's imagination, but Wilbur's voice suddenly sounded a little more...tense. But then again, Tommy had spoken with Wilbur for a collective time of maybe an hour, and honestly, Wilbur sort of *always* sounded tense.

"You're going to steal it."

The pieces didn't quite click for a moment. Tommy, admittedly, had gotten so caught up in psychoanalyzing Wilbur that it took him a while to register anything the man had said.

But when the realization finally hit, it hit hard.

"Wha--? Wait, *Wilbur!*" Tommy blurted, "That's impossible! He's the Archbishop! You can't seriously-- Wilbur, that's insane! Wil--"

“You have one week.” said Wilbur.

The screen went dark.

Chapter End Notes

munch munch motherfuckers, take your sbi crumbs.

i will give you 2/4 and nothing more because i am evil and also because i believe in a good build up.
4/4 will come. one day.

also i know this chapter is late and im sorry but honestly guys, i have a history of breaking my end of chapter promises, you really should have expected it by now
with that said, next chapter should be out by sunday!

as always thank you for your wonderful comments, they make my day :))

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Tommy scrambles to prepare for his first job with the Antarctic gang

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Fundy was a surprisingly hard man to find information on.

As one of the highest-ranking members of Schlatt's cabinet, Tommy had thought it would be fairly simple to get some details about the man. After all, he was the head of Church Prime, the organization that practically ran the city.

And yet, it had been three days and Tommy still had absolutely nothing.

He had gone to all of his usual sources, asked every single information dealer on his side of the Underground, hell, he'd even messaged 404 in a late-night moment of desperation, but no one seemed to know anything about the elusive Archbishop.

The man was apparently a bit of a recluse, and with good reason. While Church Prime as a whole was adored by almost all the citizens of Manburg, to the people of the slums Fundy was and always would be a member of Schlatt's cabinet first and a leader of the Church second. Even if his association with the Church gave him a few bonus points with the people of Eastside, they wouldn't hesitate to murder him if he ever dared to step foot into the slums.

So to avoid getting stabbed, he tended to keep his appearances private, infrequent, and for Light's citizens only. He led the church from the safety of the shadows--sightings of him were far and few in between. Which was a problem for Tommy, who sort of needed information about the man if he was ever going to find him at the festival in four days.

At this point Tommy had exhausted basically all of his contacts except for one or two long shots, and he had no idea where else to look. Surely somebody, *somewhere*, had seen Fundy, but there were tens of thousands of people in East Side alone, and Tommy couldn't very well go up to each and every one of them and ask whether they had seen a stray Archbishop wandering around. He really and truly was stuck.

"He's a literal ghost!" Tommy complained to Wilbur that night in their check-in call, "If this was your way of trying to ease me into your guys' sort of work, you fucking *failed!*"

Normally he wouldn't be so blunt, but frankly Tommy was *tired*. He'd spent every second of the last three days running back and forth across the city and he had nothing to show for it. He was at the end of his rope. It didn't help that Wilbur looked so fucking *happy* about it.

"You're really having trouble with this, huh?" Wilbur tried and failed to look upset about the news.

"You don't have to look so smug about it, dickhead." Tommy snapped irritably, "But yes. I am. Because Fundy is a *literal* fucking hobbit. I swear the man must live under a rock because not a single dealer can give me *anything*. Prime, I can't even find someone who can tell me what the fucker looks like, much less where he'll be during the festival."

Wilbur sobered suddenly.

“What he looks like?” Wilbur mumbled, his jaw clenching and unclenching, his eyes going distant. Tommy had seen it happen enough times over the previous days to realize Wilbur wasn’t *actually* trying to get a reaction out of Tommy. He just did that, sometimes, when he was lost in thought.

“Red hair, brown eyes, fox-like features,” Wilbur said quietly, his shoulders tense, his eyebrows pinched, “He’ll be wearing the ring, of course, which shouldn’t be too hard to spot, but if you can’t see that from far off, he also favors an amber fur coat.”

Tommy stared.

There was just *so much* to unpack from that. Tommy was honestly a little overwhelmed as he tried to process that Wilbur had known *literally* all the information he had needed from the very beginning, and so he said out the first thing that entered his mind.

“He’s a fuckin’ *ginger*?” Tommy blurted, “Explains a lot.”

And Wilbur... he *laughed*.

Well, it wasn’t a laugh, not really. It was more of a huff of acknowledgement. Tommy still counted it as a win.

Tommy knocked on the door of Sam’s shop and winced. He should’ve expected this.

He had been standing there for a few minutes now, alternating between knocking on the heavy wooden door and wondering why he had thought this was a good idea. Of course, Sam wasn’t going to let him back so easily. The man had basically kicked him to the curb the last time he had shown up to the shop.

Sam’s threats echoed in the back of Tommy’s mind. He shouldn’t have even shown up here.

But it was day number four of his hunt for answers, and honestly, Tommy was getting desperate. Wilbur had given him the details of Fundy’s appearance, but even that would only help him so much. Thousands and thousands of people flocked to Schlatt’s festival, no way was he going to be able to spot one random dude in the crowd, fur coat or no. He needed somebody who had actually attended the event, who knew the layout of the square, who could tell Tommy where he could find Fundy in the crowd.

Every single one of his other sources had come up empty. Tommy had two possible contacts left, and Sam was one of them.

And so he was here, metaphorical tail between his legs, at Sam’s door. He knew the man was there, somewhere inside the shop, because although the door was locked he could see light from the crack underneath it. Sam just wasn’t answering. Tommy banged on the door again.

I could always just pick the locks...

Tommy banished the thought as soon as it entered his head. Even *he* wasn’t stupid enough to break into the shop of a man who threatened to kill him less than a week ago, especially since aforementioned shop was literally chock-full of lethal weapons that Sam wielded with deadly accuracy.

Maybe Sam was just...sleeping. At 1100 in the morning.

Yeah. That’s what he would go with.

Tommy slunk in on himself, turning to go. He could just...come back later. He trudged away, defeat evident in the set of his shoulders. Well, that was one source down, he supposed.

A thud echoed from inside Sam's shop. Tommy froze.

Heavy footsteps came from somewhere behind the door. Tommy rushed back over to the front of the shop. From the other side came the metallic click of a lock being undone.

The door creaked open.

Sam looked like he hadn't slept in a week, his green hair unkempt. Deep purple bags lingered under his eyes. His mouth was drawn into a scowl, his expression guarded. Frankly he looked like someone had chewed him up and spit him back out again.

Tommy saw him and lit up like the sun.

Looking like shit or not, this was *Sam*, and he had opened the door, which meant that maybe he wasn't mad, maybe this whole thing had been one big misunderstanding and Sam would take him inside and show him a new crossbow design and he could apologize for ever bringing the Underground up and--.

Sam took one look at Tommy and slammed the door shut.

The lock clicked back into place.

Tommy took the rejection in stride.

Sure, his eyes were watering (dust), and it sort of felt like someone had just stabbed him in the chest (heartburn), but the important thing was that Tommy was not curled up into a ball on the ground and/or stabbing something. He was *fine*.

Tommy stomped away from the store. No point *wasting* any more time beating *that* horse. Sam had clearly decided that the best course of action was cutting Tommy out of his life entirely, had clearly decided the five years they had spent together meant *nothing*. Good. Fine. Tommy didn't need the bastard anyway. He was fine.

His hand unconsciously drifted to his side, ghosting over his staff. His hand burned when it touched the cool metal. Sam had made it for him.

Fuck.

Who was he kidding. This shit *hurt*.

Sam was...well, not quite a friend, but he was as close to one as Tommy had ever let anyone get. He'd spent weeks upon weeks in that shop, practicing with the tools, learning how to weld from Sam, talking about anything and everything. He'd felt almost safe under Sam's watchful eye.

And in a single moment Sam had crushed all of Tommy's silly, childish, *stupid* thoughts of comradeship.

It's for the best, Tommy told himself.

Yeah, it hurt like fucking hell, felt a little like his soul was being torn into two, but in the end it was for the greater good. Better that they cut it off now before he had any real delusions of trust or sincerity or *affection*. That would only make it hurt more when Sam inevitably cut him off.

Because that's what they always did wasn't it?

This was a learning experience. A lesson. He'd learned it with his parents, and he'd learned it with Dream, but Tommy had always been stubborn and so he had ignored it again and had gone and gotten way too attached to Sam too. And here he was again, shattered.

This was a good reminder. This was why he never got too close to Bad and Skeppy. This was why he didn't *do* friends. Because in the end no one really cared, and all that those frivolous attachments would do was come back to bite him in the ass.

This was stupid. There was no point moping over this. He was being a total bitch and Tommy Innett was *not* a bitch. Tommy scrubbed at his eyes furiously.

This was a good thing. A blessing in disguise. Tommy repeated it until he believed it.

Tommy's last contact was a total bust.

He had hoped that maybe, just *maybe*, the owner of one of Tommy's favorite hangouts, a place *very* cleverly called Pogtopia Pub, might have heard something about Fundy in the gossip around the bar, but the man just shook his head, looking down at Tommy like he couldn't imagine why this scrawny twig had come asking about one of the highest-ranking members of Schlatt's cabinet. Predictable, but still disappointing. Tommy sunk down into a table at the back corner of the bar.

The pub owner really had been the last person on a long, *long* list of sources. There was just no one else Tommy could plausibly ask, not without raising suspicion. There was certainly the possibility that Quackity had some reliable info, but asking about the Antarctic gang during one visit and Fundy the very next would raise red flags for anyone with half a brain. The man was too sharp--there was no way he wouldn't put the pieces together and realize that Tommy hadn't been joking about that whole 'best thief in the Underground' thing. Which meant Tommy was out of options.

So, come the festival, Tommy was legitimately just going to have to wing it. He would be relying on sheer, dumb luck to spot Fundy in a crowd of that size. Tommy sunk his head into his hands.

That was going to fucking suck.

One wrong move, one moment of inattention, and he could miss his chance entirely. Fundy was going to be a literal speck in that crowd, and without any idea of the organization of the parade there was no way for Tommy to narrow down the area he searched. Which meant either Tommy would have to try and get a bird's eye view from the rooftops of the buildings surrounding Schlatt's square, or he would have to try and blend in with the crowd and struggle to methodically search the entire square from the ground. Both options sort of sucked.

On the rooftops he would have a better vantage point, sure, but he would also have to stay out of sight of the aerial search drones that would definitely be patrolling there. Not to mention that even if he spotted Fundy he would have the issue of actually getting *down*. There was no guarantee that Fundy wouldn't have moved by the time he got back to the surface.

On the ground was theoretically the better option--though the hordes of people would limit his sight, they would also shroud his presence from the drones and guards, and even though he might have to search the entire square to find Fundy, once he spotted the man he would be fairly easy to trail.

So *theoretically*, yeah, that was a great plan.

The problem was...Tommy didn't exactly do well in dense crowds of Light's citizens. If the incident at Quackity's casino had shown him anything, it was that he sort of freaked out when he had no room to

breathe. Searching through that entire square, trapped between all of those people, for so long--well, disaster was bound to strike. And if it did, and Tommy had a freak out in that mob, he was *royally* screwed.

So, like, those plans *blowed*. If only he had the details about this stupid *fucking* festival, maybe he could make something more concrete. Tommy groaned.

It didn't help that, even in the early afternoon, the pub was completely packed. Everywhere Tommy looked someone was downing a potion or whispering conspiratorially or laughing way too loud. The entire bar seemed to hum with energy, which wasn't much help for the headache starting to form behind Tommy's eyes.

"Tommy?" A voice shouted over the commotion. Tommy instinctively perked up, twisting in his seat to spot the newcomer, rolling his eyes when he spotted the bright purple sweatshirt and shaggy blonde hair making its way towards him.

"Purpled." Tommy grumbled when the kid stopped at his table. "How do you always show up the instant I decide I don't want to talk to people?"

Purpled grinned cheekily. "It's a talent. One of many." Tommy, for once, didn't argue. The statement was true and both boys knew it. It was one of the reasons Tommy absolutely *despised* Purpled.

Purpled was just too *good*. At *everything*. He had the combat skills of a pro, could parkour across the rooftops of the city like nobody's business, and had successfully evaded capture from drone squads three times that Tommy knew of, but he had the absolute *gall* to go about his life like this level of skill was a perfectly normal thing. Tommy ran into him almost every week in the middle of one of his jobs in some insanely dangerous location, and the kid acted like he was out for a fucking walk in the park.

Like one time, when Tommy had been tasked with robbing a jewel museum in the Lights. After he snatched the prize diamond of the collection, he'd made his escape by painstakingly inching his way up a wet, slippery water drain five stories above the pavement. And when he finally collapsed onto the rooftop, who did he find sitting there, stargazing? Fucking Purpled.

And another time, he had intercepted a weapons delivery for an arms dealer by clinging to the bottom of a ten-ton truck as it barreled through the factory district, his hands sweaty, his neck just inches away from the pavement that was zooming past. When the truck finally got to the pickup location for the weapons shipment and Tommy crawled his way out from under it with aching muscles, who was chatting up the guards in charge of protecting the shipment? Fucking *Purpled*.

Later, Purpled told Tommy he had been trying to convince the guards that he was a new intern at the guard post, just to see if he could. Tommy had seriously considered slapping him right there and then.

He probably would have too, if the kid didn't also run an infamous trap shop a few tunnels away from Pogtopia Pub, a shop that Tommy bought supplies from for almost all of his jobs. It sold everything he could possibly need, from tripwires to homemade bear traps to powerful little smoke bombs that Purpled called Fireballs. Since Tommy didn't really fancy building all of his heisting needs himself, he had to remain cordial to Purpled, at least for now.

"What do you *want*, dickhead?" he groaned at Purpled, who had settled down into the chair across from Tommy. Purpled had very clearly been waiting for the question, because he smiled innocently.

"Is it so weird to wonder why my favorite customer hasn't been in the shop for a week and a half?" Purpled said, "Just checking in, you know."

Tommy rolled his eyes. So *that* was what this was about.

“No, you purple bitch, I haven’t been buying from another trap shop. If a shop existed that could match your prices I would’ve found it long ago.” Tommy glared up at Purpled, who had relaxed completely into his chair, his grin steadily growing, “Trust me, I’ve looked. I’ve just been a little preoccupied trying to get info on this *stupid fuckin’* Fundy guy.”

Purpled huffed out a laugh, “The Archbishop? Don’t know why you would care about him, the guy is definitely insane. And he’s *ginger*.”

Tommy froze. His eyes slowly rose to meet Purpled’s.

“How the fuck would *you* know?”

Purpled was nonchalant when he said, “I’ve seen him before. At some, like, big festival thing.”

“Schlatt’s birthday festival.”

“That’s the one!” Purpled exclaimed, “The guy looked like a real prick, to be honest. Fur coat and everything.”

Tommy’s eye twitched. “And why were you even there, exactly?”

“I don’t know dude, a year or two ago this one guy mentioned that this festival was happening and I was like, huh, sounds sorta interesting, maybe I should go see this thing. So I climbed up the side of this building and watched it.” Purpled’s face twisted, “It was sort of boring, honestly.”

“*You--*” Tommy took a deep, grounding breath. Primes. Women. Happy thoughts. “You just *casually* went to one of the most dangerous areas of the city and spied on one of the biggest events of the year?”

“I guess, yeah,” Purpled shrugged, “I mean there were a few guards there, maybe a few dozen drones, but they’re like super easy to fool y’know. It was pretty chill, actually.”

Was Tommy having a stroke? Was this what a stroke felt like? It felt a little like half of his brain had just stopped working entirely, because there was no fucking way this asshole had just insinuated that the amalgamation of every single hostile force in the city was “*pretty chill*”.

This was why Tommy hated his guts. Purpled was just so utterly *relaxed*. Nothing fazed him. And he was skilled, sure, but skilled people had fallen to Schlatt’s guards many times before. Everyone knew it, which meant that to do all of his antics Purpled must also have been insane. Because either he had a really shit sense of self-preservation or he was just plain dumb, and all Tommy really wanted to do was shake him and make him understand just how fucking *lucky* he was.

The world had never given *Tommy* that sort of leeway. Tommy had always been forced to be so *painstakingly* careful and he still had near death encounters like every other week, but this kid could just waltz into the highest security event in the city without a care in the world? How was that fucking fair?

Well. The tides were fucking turning. Tommy’s hand clenched around his staff and in one swift motion he had extended it to its full length, sweeping it to hover an inch from Purpled’s neck.

“Care to share what you know?”

He pressed a button on the handle and the staff crackled with electricity. Purpled didn’t flinch. His eyes narrowed.

“You and I both know that won’t work on me Tommy.” Purpled said quietly, “I’m not scared of you.”

Tommy huffed angrily. “Fine.”

He lowered his staff. Purpled was right. Knowing him, he probably wouldn't even wince if Tommy electrocuted him. Not to mention that doing so would probably get Tommy permanently uninvited from Purpled's shop.

"What do you want?" Tommy questioned tersely, clearly more than a little irritated that he was giving in to fucking *Purpled*.

"You know how this works," Purpled replied, eyes calculating, "What do you have to offer?"

"One hundred Primes."

Purpled laughed. It was not kind. "What am I, a charity? Five hundred."

Tommy gritted his teeth. "Two. Take it or leave it, dickhead."

"Two fifty."

"Done."

"Perfect."

Both of them relaxed in their chairs almost imperceptibly, Purpled's shoulders lost their tension. Tommy's staff lowered. He leaned forward in his chair.

"Well then. Tell me everything."

Chapter End Notes

and we're back with another chapter of pain
everyone ready to see tommy pull off his first heist?

im feeling super motivated so double update this week, expect the next chapter to be out by friday. i am
a kind and merciful god.

as always thank you for your wonderful comments they literally make my day!

uh also, shameless plug here, but i made an open world minecraft server i would love for more people
to join in! here's our discord: <https://discord.gg/F6TKbGvy8r>

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Tommy's long awaited first heist

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wilbur was freaking Tommy out.

He was pacing the room now, walking in and out of the camera frame with long, hurried strides. Tommy couldn't see his face--the man was freakishly tall when he stood and his legs filled the entire screen--but he could imagine Wilbur's face well enough without the visual. Pinched eyebrows, clouded eyes, an irritated scowl--the same expression he had been making for the entire call.

"And you're sure that you have all of your gear?" Wilbur questioned without stopping to look at the camera, fidgeting with his hands behind his back. He cracked his knuckles.

"For the fifth fucking time, *yes* I have everything ready." Tommy responded, more than a little exasperated, because honestly what was with the interrogation? He got that it was the night before his first big job and all, but they had been at it for an hour already and at this point all of Wilbur's questions were either outlandish or repeated. It was getting old real fast, but Wilbur didn't seem to be slowing down the inquisition. Couldn't he just drop it? He kept asking questions and pestering Tommy and acting all panicky, and it was fucking weird because it *almost* felt like Wilbur was nervous.

Which was insane. Wilbur didn't get *nervous*. Wilbur had the emotional range of a teaspoon.

In the week that they had been doing their check in calls Tommy had only ever seen Wilbur show a grand total of three distinct emotions--smug superiority, icy rage, and irritated, childish pettiness. Nothing else. Tommy wasn't sure Wilbur even had the *capability* for anything else. Certainly not nervousness, and certainly not for Tommy.

Wilbur cracked his knuckles for the seventeenth time in ten minutes.

Fuck. Okay. Wilbur was nervous. Wilbur was nervous and it was making Tommy nervous.

Who the hell *was* this Fundy guy? What the fuck was this job going to be like if it was worrying *Wilbur*?

"What about if a guard recognizes you? What then?" Wilbur asked, wringing his hands behind his back, fiddling with the sleeves of his long trench coat.

Tommy groaned. "We've been *over* this Wilbur. No one is going to recognize me because I'm not going into Schlatt's Square wearin' Slum's clothes because I'm not an idiot. And even if some bitch does notice me, I have an escape plan, again, because I'm *not an idiot*."

Now, said escape plan may have relied pretty heavily on how fast Tommy could run and how accurately he could swing his staff at guards, but Wilbur didn't need to know that. All that would do was make the interrogation last even longer, and Tommy would rather climb the Walls and jump off the top than deal with Wilbur trying to poke holes in his plan for another hour. Not only was it *fucking annoying*, but it sort of messed with Tommy's nerve.

Tommy had thought he'd finally come to terms with the job, had spent days on end convincing himself that he should actually go through with it despite all the risks, and Wilbur the Bitch's questioning had a pit of uncertainty forming in his stomach all over again. Which was honestly the last thing he needed.

Of course, Wilbur didn't notice Tommy's unease.

"Okay, okay." He stopped pacing for a second, mumbling to himself under his breath as he counted something off on his fingers, like he was making sure there was nothing else he had forgotten to pester Tommy about.

Tommy perked up from where his head had sunk to rest in his arms.

The pacing resumed. Wilbur cracked his knuckles. Again. Tommy's head fell back into his arms.

"What if you can't reach Fundy from your spot in the crowd? What if Schlatt cancels the procession at the last minute? Or--or what if they've upped security and Fundy has a squad of search drones on him, or what if--?"

"Wilbur!" Tommy cut him off with a sharp yell. Wilbur froze. "I got this. I know what I'm doing."

And it was an absolute lie because Tommy had no idea what he was doing, had no idea if everything would even remotely go as it should, because he was basing his entire plan on intel from *Purpled* and *Wilbur*, two people that Tommy, frankly, wouldn't trust with his real name, much less his life.

And even if they had both been entirely truthful--which, let's face it, the odds were slim--who was to say Schlatt hadn't changed anything in the time since they had gotten their information? What if the layout of the square had been modified? What if Fundy had gotten a dye job or had finally realized that wearing a fur coat made him look like a pretentious asshole and Tommy couldn't find him in the crowd? Or better yet, what if he had just decided not to wear his ring at all?

If Tommy had a Prime for every hole in his plan, he wouldn't be a thief in the first place. The whole thing was a shot in the dark. It was a flip of the coin at best and downright suicidal at worst.

But Wilbur had actually stopped pacing, was back to sitting in his normal spot, and wasn't cracking his knuckles every five seconds, so Tommy, for once, kept his mouth shut.

"You're right," Wilbur said, something weary in his tone, "I'm thinking too much. It'll be fine." Tommy wasn't convinced. His mouth might have said one thing, but his eyes told a different story. They went all hazy and distant, his mind somewhere far-off.

"You look a little worried there, Wilbur." Tommy said with a small smile, only half joking, "That wouldn't happen to be a little bit of concern for your favorite criminal master thief, would it?"

Tommy had meant for it to be part question, part friendly jab, because Tommy had no idea how to deal with this weird, anxious aura Wilbur was giving off. It was an attempt, albeit a poor one, to somehow get back to the normal animosity between them, but as soon as the words left his mouth Wilbur's entire face shut down. In a flash the strange nervousness was gone, and Wilbur's entire expression hardened, his gaze sharpening to daggers, his frown becoming deeper. Tommy blinked.

"You think this is about you? You think I'm *worried* about *you*?" Wilbur laughed, cold and sharp, and the grin fell off Tommy's face.

"No, uh, definitely not, no, I just--" Tommy stammered out, because he had wanted this, had wanted them to go back to their normal bickering, but he couldn't help but feel like Wilbur's shift had been a little too abrupt, a little too pointed.

Like, Tommy hated Wilbur, thought he was a total bitch, and Wilbur had certainly made it clear that he felt the same way about Tommy, but even then, none of their insults ever had the venom Wilbur's just had. There was something wrathful behind his words, something cutting this time, like he intended to hurt. Like Tommy had somehow said something wrong.

Wilbur's face was colder than he had ever seen it, his voice ice. "Don't show up tomorrow unless you have that ring."

The call went dark.

Hours later, Tommy laid unsleeping in his makeshift bed and stared up at the cracking gray ceiling. When exhaustion finally dragged him under, his dreams were made of glittering silver rings and stone-faced guards and his blood against the pavement.

Tommy had not expected doubts to set in this early.

Sure, he had assumed that he would have some nerves about the whole situation--it was the most dangerous job that he had ever done, after all, and Tommy's plan was far from rock solid--but he'd hoped all the uncertainties would hit once he was actually in the festival, when it would be too late to turn back. Not before he had even closed in on Schlatt's Square.

But here he was, in the middle of the Lights, on the verge of a breakdown.

It was the skyscrapers that did it for him. The shift was abrupt--one minute he was jogging past the small, homely shops of the mid ring, and the next he was an ant in the presence of giants, helpless to do anything but watch them ascend into the heavens, piercing the veil of gray clouds that spread across the sky.

It was dizzying. They were just too massive, too imposing, too different from everything he knew in East Side, and he knew it was stupid because these were just *buildings*, just lifeless husks of metal, and he had seen them all before without this consuming feeling of panic pressing down on his chest, but he couldn't help but sink to his knees on the side of the street and second guess everything.

What was he even *doing* here? He didn't belong here, among the towers that touched the sky and the streets paved with gold. He hardly belonged in the slums. Who was he to think that he could pull this off? He was *nothing*. Just a kid from the streets with too much nerve and too little self-preservation. He didn't-- he couldn't do this. He couldn't go to that square and steal from Fundy.

He should just back out. Quit while he was ahead.

It was appealing, the idea of taking everything he owned and just disappearing, of never looking back. The promise of a fresh start.

And for a moment, Tommy was going to do it.

He would be hunted, sure. By the Antarctic gang, by Dream. He wasn't so naive as to think that they would let him go so easily. But he had been on the run before, knew a thing or two about evasion, and he could manage. Better a life running than one trapped under their thumb.

The last traces of Tommy Innett would need to disappear, and with it would go Theseus. Hell, he'd probably have to give up thievery entirely. But still. For a moment, Tommy thought it might be worth it.

He stared at the curb a moment longer.

Wait, hold up, what the fuck was he thinking? Abandon Theseus? Give up his life's work? Tommy gave himself a mental slap in the face. The whole reason he created Theseus was because he was tired of being

just another face in the crowd, because he wanted something more, and he was seriously thinking about giving it up because of one hard job?

Working with those Antarctic gang bitches must have fucked with his mind or something. From the very beginning Tommy had set out to forge his own path, had poured his heart into his work. He would never give it up and doom himself to fade into obscurity.

Prime, Tommy couldn't believe he had become such a whiny *bitch*. He had been complaining about the best opportunity of his miserable life because it was *dangerous*. As if he hadn't signed up for that when he became Theseus.

He needed to remember what he had set out to do. Overpower, outsmart, exploit. When the Antarctic gang eventually stabbed him in the back--because they would--Tommy needed to be ready. He had been so frantic preparing for the festival that he had completely abandoned his plans to get blackmail on the gang. Well, no longer. As soon as he snatched this ring from Fundy he would have to refocus. Start finding new sources, get more information. He would *not* go all complacent and wait for orders like he was their little thieving lapdog.

Tommy Innett didn't fucking listen to *orders*. Tommy Innett made his *own* rules. He broke things and did crime and enjoyed doing it.

He would figure something out. He was Tommy Innett and he was fucking epic.

He pushed himself onto his feet with new energy, brushing off his jacket. It wouldn't do him any good to get dust on his clothes, not if he wanted to be able to blend in with the crowd. It was going to be hard enough as it was--the thin suit coat and wrinkled dress pants he had bought for two dozen Primes didn't exactly scream class. Sneaking his way past the guards was going to be literal hell.

Tommy pushed the thought from his mind. The guard situation would be a problem for future-Tommy.

For now, he was just glad that everyone in this part of the Lights had left for the festival hours ago. It was a virtual ghost town now, which was perfectly alright with Tommy because it meant no one was around to see the random kid in shitty dress clothes booking it up the streets. Once he drew closer to the center of the city he would have to be far more careful to blend in, but for now Tommy closed his eyes and let himself enjoy the crisp morning air brushing against his skin as he ran.

He tried to ignore the way his heart still pounded in his chest.

Getting into the festival was much simpler than Tommy thought it would be.

Maybe it was their arrogance, their confidence in the fact that no one would *dare* attempt to break into the most secure event in the city, but for some reason there were only two-- *two* --guards watching the Eastern entrance. There was no excuse for such carelessness, not when the festival had the entire police force of the city at their disposal.

Like really. Two guards? *Two*? How disappointing.

Tommy supposed it made his job easier, but *still*. *This* was what he had spent so long hyping himself up for? *This* was what he had worried himself sick over? Two guards? It was sort of sad, honestly. Tommy had thought he would need to pull out all of the stops for this job, had run through every possible contingency plan just in case, but it was looking more and more like this would be one of his effortless cases, just mindless crime.

Prime, were all of his jobs with the Antarctic gang going to be this boring? What was next, stealing candy from children? Tax fraud?

From a distance Tommy caught sight of the holsters against the guards' hips and swallowed. Maybe he should have actually gotten into the festival before he started talking out of his ass.

He glanced down at his shoddy dress clothes, giving them the shining endorsement of *good enough*, and stepped out from where he was hidden in an alleyway, falling in line with the other Lights citizens marching through the entrance. Everything had opened up a few hours earlier, so most of the guests had swarmed the entrances then. The folks Tommy was hiding himself in were the stragglers of the group, and none of them gave him a second glance, too preoccupied with making it to the square before the main festivities began. All as planned.

He was much closer now, only a few meters away from the nearest guard, and he forced himself to push his shoulders down into a poor imitation of relaxation, straightening his entire posture into something proud and confident. He left his gaze sweep vacantly across the street, landing on the towering buildings that boxed him in on both sides, on the back of heads in the throng of people, anything to keep from curling in on himself.

It would be a dead giveaway. Lights' citizens didn't shrink, they strode. They didn't falter. So Tommy let his gaze drift idly, like this was normal, like he was bored--

A guard caught his eye. Tommy froze.

It was only for a split second, barely a pause in his stride, but the guard's eyes narrowed. Her hand twitched toward the gun at her side.

No. No no no, he was not getting taken out before he even got to Fundy. He could salvage this.

He schooled his expression into one of forced nonchalance and gave the woman an easy nod.

She didn't react save for the edges of her mouth pulling downward, and Tommy knew it was too late and she had seen through everything. He couldn't believe he was going to be taken down by an ordinary patrol guard. He had been expecting an epic chase or a dramatic boss fight as his way to go. *This* was just fucking embarrassing.

But the guard just nodded back at him with a smile.

Holy shit. Fuck, that was close.

His legs suddenly felt impossibly heavy and he forced himself to keep moving forward, one step, another, until he had passed over the threshold.

He was in.

The buildings that had been boxing him in on either side fell away and the morning light suddenly hit him with full force, his vision flashing white. He blindly stumbled a few more steps into the plaza before he held a hand up to shield his eyes. The square finally came into view.

Tommy stopped dead in his tracks and stared in awe.

Everything Purpled had told him days earlier flooded back.

The square is, well, just one big square. Each side is maybe...a kilometer long? Maybe two. Don't look at me like that Tommy. No, I'm not bullshitting you, the square really is that big. For Prime's sake, put the knife away, I'm telling you the truth. And anyway you couldn't stab me if you tried. Wha--hey! That wasn't an invitation to actually try, idiot! Prime, all I had to do was keep my mouth shut Purpled, but noooo, I had to start talking about visiting that stupid square and now I'm stuck with this dunce. I mean, what the hell, I

guess you're paying me, right? Listen up, I'm not saying this twice. The square's big, but don't let that fool you. They must shove fifty thousand people inside that place. I'm not sure how anyone can even breathe in that mess.

Even after all of Purpled's assurances Tommy still hadn't quite believed that he was telling the truth. Tommy considered himself to be a pretty good judge of character and he hadn't seen any major red flags from the kid yet, but Purpled was good at literally everything. He wouldn't be surprised if he was able to lie through his teeth too. And Purpled kind of seemed like the kind of guy who would think screwing Tommy over was funny.

Again, he was just....*shifty*. Tommy didn't trust people who were that good at life.

Purpled had clearly not been lying about this, though. Schlatt's Square was *big*. No, that didn't quite encompass it. The square needed a more dramatic description than big. It was huge. Massive.

And it was ritzy too. Tents of soft, thick fabric dotted the square, rippling in the morning wind, and vendors leaned out of the entrances to holler out their wares. Gold-trimmed lamp posts shone down warm light even though it was mid-morning. Tiles in the pavement formed intricate, swirling designs.

Tommy didn't like it.

Well, he liked the square itself. It was colorful and vibrant and warm, of course he did. What he didn't like was the *people*. The plaza was practically an ocean of them, more than Tommy had ever seen in one place in his life, swarming the square, buzzing with energy. Purpled had been right when to question how any of them were able to breathe. So many people had been packed into the square that it was honestly a wonder no one had been trampled.

And there, towering above it all, was a building of smooth white stone looming over the rest square.

Right in the center of it all is Schlatt's mansion. Big and marble and with these massive columns, the whole deal. His White House, they call it, after some historical reference from before the Flash. That's where Schlatt will be.

Tommy had no idea how anyone could live in the mansion. It was shiny and big and white, sure, but it looked like a *tomb*. Completely lifeless. Tommy couldn't spot a single window on those smooth stone walls, and while the size was certainly impressive it just felt too...imposing. What could any one person possibly do with all that space?

It also felt just a little bit pretentious to build your house in the very center of the city, especially when it was surrounded by the world's biggest, plainest back yard. Really, who needed a whole ass square surrounding their house?

But then again, this was Schlatt. He supposed that after being a tyrannical dictator for seventeen years it wasn't much more to be sort of a self-centered douche.

Tommy surveyed the landscape for a moment longer, trying to pretend like he wasn't stalling travelling through the horde of people. Surely it couldn't be that bad, right? It was really only a few hundred meters between his location and where he needed to reach for the plan. It couldn't possibly be *that* horrible. Right?

The Quackity Incident flashed through Tommy's mind. He shuddered.

Okay. This was going to suck.

Too many people, too little space. Tommy would hate it. That didn't mean he couldn't manage it, though. He could keep the panic down long enough to get the job done. He had to.

So before he could think too long about what he was doing Tommy plunged into the crowd, worming his way past dancing couples, ducking his way under rogue elbows, squirming through tiny gaps in the crowd. Thankfully, no one seemed to notice him other than a few confused glances thrown his way. Everyone was too caught up in the fun.

And for the most part Tommy was managing his panic too. He just. Didn't breathe. Or think. And that seemed to work pretty well. Mostly.

So things were going well. He was basically halfway there too. He just had to keep it together a little longer.

Out of the corner of his eye Tommy spotted the black suit-like uniform of a guard and froze, his gaze shooting over to the man, because oh fuck he did *not* want to run into a guard right now. Purpled's voice filtered into his mind again.

Guards are stationed around the outer edge of the square and around Schlatt's manion, so the middle of the surrounding ring is probably the safest. There are some guards spread within the crowd of course, but no one wants to actually work during a party, so as long as you don't go up and punch one of them you should be fine. Which, knowing you....

Tommy had seriously considered stabbing Purpled when he said that, but he *did* have a point. Tommy had a knack for getting himself into the worst possible situations at the worst possible times.

He made sure to give the guard a wide berth. No need to tempt fate.

At exactly 1200 they sound these trumpets that just murder your ears and the entire square goes silent. Completely silent. Like, in a creepy way. They all just sorta stand there, without moving, and then this massive doorway on the south side of the mansion slides open and out comes this military parade. Schlatt front and center, of course.

The south side. That's where Tommy was headed. If he wanted his plan to work he needed to be near the parade and he needed to be there the moment they came out of the mansion. From what Purpled had told him, after Schlatt and all of his cabinet did their little parade and a few short speeches they retreated back into the depths of the mansion and didn't reemerge. No way he could reach Fundy if that happened.

Tommy was *not* going to miss his chance. So he needed to be there ahead of time, which meant he needed to reach the south side before the trumpets went off.

Luckily, he only had another 50 meters or so before he reached his spot, by his guess. It looked like everything was going to go perfectly to plan.

It was just his luck that it was at that exact moment the trumpets began blaring across the square.

Holy shit, Purpled hadn't been bullshitting him about this either, the trumpets were fucking insane. Briefly the thought that maybe Purpled wasn't quite as 'shifty' as Tommy thought he was crossed his mind, but it was soon drowned out by how fucking *loud* the trumpets were. Like sure, he guessed it needed to be sort of loud to be heard over all the chatter and laughter and shouting, but this felt like his ears were about to start bleeding. This felt like partial deafness and permanent hearing damage.

Putting his hands over his ears was suddenly starting to look real appealing, but Tommy looked around wildly at the people surrounding him and no one else had even flinched. In fact, everyone had gone completely, eerily still.

He forced his hands to his side. The trumpets kept screeching. If there was an actual melody somewhere in the mess Tommy couldn't hear it. He tasted blood.

His thoughts were a jumble now, piercing pain and a stream of *make it stop too loud shit loud fuck this* and desperately trying to keep his hands from clutching his head. One thought echoed above it all--*when the fuck*

is this going to end?

Of course, as soon as he thought that the trumpets abruptly stopped with one last wailing, discordant note. It hung in the silence of the square. No one in the crowd moved.

Were they like? Waiting for something? Or what? Nothing was *happening*.

And then the mansion began to move.

It took a moment for Tommy to realize that it was only one section of the mansion that was moving, a side of the building sliding open like a massive door, and in that same instant he realized he wasn't in position yet. Shit. The crowd was still standing stock still, so Tommy opted to subtly inch his way toward his spot.

He might not have made it if the door hadn't been so fucking slow, but the thing was moving at the speed of a search drone without propellers. So. Slow.

The door finally stopped with a thud as he arrived. Past the doorway, the inside of the mansion was shrouded in complete darkness. Nothing was visible. Suddenly, something in the abyss shifted and people began to appear from within. The parade had begun.

First came a formation of maybe a dozen guards clad in the typical charcoal suits, materializing from the darkness of the mansion. In unison the crowd stepped back, parting to make them a wide path. It was more than a little creepy.

A long, metallic platform came next, appearing from the entranceway. It towered above the guards' heads, seemingly propelled on its own, and the front had dark engravings that Tommy couldn't quite make out from his spot in the crowd. It inched out from the darkness and Tommy glanced around and couldn't help but notice that everyone seemed to be holding their breath. Tommy looked back at the massive doorway and the blood drained from his face.

There, atop the moving platform, was President Schlatt.

He had never seen the president in person before, but really who else could it be? He was the only one on the platform, half a dozen feet higher than the rest of his cabinet. His looks were a dead giveaway too--Purple had described Schlatt's appearance with a shudder and two words: *mutton chops*. It was an accurate description. Schlatt needed to fire whichever hair stylist had told him *that* was a good idea, because they were clearly on drugs.

Nobody else was with Schlatt on top of the platform, but the cabinet members trailed out behind it, surrounded by even more guards. Tommy caught a flash of a brunette in tinted glasses that could only be the infamous Eret. A second later he spotted the vibrant mask of Ponk and the white hoodie of Punz--the assassins. It hit him that this was *the* cabinet, the people he had spent his whole life afraid of, standing right in front of him.

They were surprisingly underwhelming. He didn't know what he was expecting but it certainly wasn't for them to look so startlingly...normal.

Concerningly absent though, was Fundy. Tommy was sure he was there of course, somewhere within the group of Schlatt's cabinet trailing behind the platform. He had to be. Still, it didn't help Tommy's nerves that he hadn't spotted the man yet.

The procession made its way down the path the crowd had parted to make, creaking to a stop a few dozen meters from Tommy. No one moved. The square was still eerily silent.

Out of nowhere Schlatt raised his arms to the sky and the crowd erupted into cheers.

Tommy flinched at the abrupt shift, whipping his head to stare at the people around him. Was he supposed to be cheering too? Was this what they were doing now?

The whole procession began to move down the path again, the guards and officials all falling in line next to Schlatt's platform or behind it.

It only took a moment and the parade was right next to him, only a few meters away, passing by his spot in the crowd. Tommy waited for...something. For the guards to suddenly swivel and point their guns at him. For someone to make eye contact with him and just *know*, maybe.

A man with scarlet hair that could only be Fundy passed by, not a meter away. He didn't look at Tommy.

And then they were past him and Tommy was just sort of standing in the horde of people, subtly trying to distance himself from everyone surrounding him as he waited.

The parade made its way around the square to the cheers of the crowd, Schlatt standing at the front on his platform. He refused to wave back at the masses even once, electing to instead just stand there with his hands behind his back and a charming grin on his face. The crowd ate it up. Tommy watched the whole thing with appalment.

The people of the Lights...they seemed to *adore* Schlatt. Borderline worship him.

Did they have no idea what happened to the lower classes, or did they just not care?

The procession finally came to a halt back at the south side of the square, not too far from Tommy. Schlatt raised a hand and the square fell silent.

“Let the festivities begin!”

Tommy did a double take when he first caught sight of Fundy. The Archbishop looked, for all intents and purposes, like a kid, and Tommy couldn't help but wonder if Wilbur had given him the wrong guy to thieve from. But no, there was that shock of orange hair Wilbur had mentioned, and there was that pretentious fur coat that was just as ugly in person as Tommy had imagined.

Prime. So this was Fundy. The man couldn't have been much older than Tommy, maybe somewhere in his early twenties, and it was painfully evident that he hadn't quite grown into his limbs yet. Or a social sense--where most of the other officers had dispersed to chat with people in the square, Fundy was just sort of standing there awkwardly, looking like he wanted nothing more than to retreat into the mansion.

Which was perfect for Tommy. It would have been that much harder to steal from him if he had been in a conversation. More eyes meant more chances to be caught.

Tommy strolled casually in Fundy's direction, keeping his left side to the man and watching him out of his peripheral vision. He forced his face to remain neutral, nonchalant, his eyes drifting casually around the square.

The whole thing needed to look perfectly accidental. Anything less and it would raise suspicions, and he needed Fundy to be completely clueless about his true intentions if he wanted to pull this off.

A moment later and he had wandered close enough that he was next to the Archbishop, who was still aimlessly gazing out at the crowd, just an arm's length away.

Fuck. Okay. He could do this.

Tommy took a single, calming breath. No more stalling then. This was it. Now or never.

So he braced himself, planted his foot against the pavement, and threw himself sideways.

Admittedly, he had let his nerves get to him. He had clearly overestimated the amount of force he would need to launch himself into the man. He had been going for an *I just tripped oops* level of power but it had ended up more like a *drone just plowed into me at full speed* level. His feet left the ground. He went airborne.

Fuck, this was going to hurt.

And then they collided. A jolt of pain zapped through Tommy's spine as his back hit Fundy's chest, a faint *oof* sounding somewhere above him.

The man had evidently tried to catch him, or shield himself maybe, his arms closing around Tommy as he fell.

The problem was he clearly had not thought it through--Tommy was practically the same size as him and hurtling towards him at full force. The effort was doomed from the start.

Fundy stumbled backward, desperately trying to keep his balance, and must have momentarily forgotten about the entire kid in his arms because suddenly Tommy was dropped face first into the pavement. His head hit the ground with a thud. Sharp pain shot through his nose.

"For all that is holy," Fundy muttered from somewhere above him, sounding dazed and vaguely irritated, "What the *fuck* was that?"

Tommy barely heard him, too occupied with trying to ignore the pain in his face. His eyes burned involuntarily, mostly because his nose was still tingling from landing face-fucking-first on it, all thanks to this Fundy fellow.

Well. He guessed, technically, him launching himself full force into the man might have contributed just a little to his injuries. Still. Fundy didn't need to just *drop* him.

"Hey!" Fundy snapped, sounding much more collected and much more angry. Tommy's head shot up instinctually.

He met Fundy's gaze with wide, teary eyes and he shrunk back, regret flashing over his face.

"Hey, hey, don't cry. It's okay, it's *okay*!" Fundy rushed to assure him, looking more than a little uncomfortable with the near crying child at his feet.

He crouched next to Tommy, sly, amber eyes scanning his face for injuries. "Prime, kid." he said with a sigh, helping Tommy to his feet, "That's definitely going to bruise. How did that even happen?" His right hand reached up to dab at some of the cuts on Tommy's face and Tommy saw it. The ring.

Wilbur had been right--it was hard to miss. Thick and silver and with a massive, glittering sapphire embedded in it. Dark engravings spiraled across the metal.

Oh man, this was good. Fundy was playing his part perfectly, walking right into Tommy's trap. All Tommy had to do now was act his heart out with the three-step plan he had come up with in that very instant.

Step 1, guilt trip.

"I--I don't even know I was just walking by and then this woman she, she just ran into me and now," Tommy scrubbed at his eyes, "*Everything* hurts. My, my head and my hands and I must've done something to my legs and I don't even know how *that* happened."

Even if Tommy was acting like he was confused, there was no way that Fundy didn't know it was his fault-- he had been the one to drop Tommy onto the pavement after all, and now this poor child would have *bruises* (oh the horror, Tommy thought wryly) and it was all because of him. Who wouldn't feel responsible? And of course, Fundy fell for it, frowning as guilt filled his eyes.

Step 2, flattery.

Tommy rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm sorry for the trouble. Prime, I can't believe the whole reason I came over here was to meet you and now I've done this." Tommy looked down bashfully.

"You came over here...to meet me?" Fundy's voice was touched and a tad bit overwhelmed. Prime, did the cabinet treat him like shit or something? This guy reeked of insecurity. It was a little sad, honestly.

Not that Tommy wasn't going to take advantage of it. He was going to exploit the hell out of it.

Tommy glanced up at him, meeting his eyes. "Of course!" he chirped, "I mean I'm sure you're used to it by now. You probably get fans all the time, being the Archbishop and all."

Fundy's face dimmed just a little. Tommy sort of felt like he had just kicked a puppy.

Fundy stared at his feet. "You'd be surprised. No one much seems to care."

Prime, this was depressing.

Tommy reminded himself not to feel bad. Fundy had spent years under Schlatt of his own free will, endorsing his policies, enabling him to murder hundreds of people in the slums.

Still. Holy shit.

Tommy painted his face in shock, his jaw dropping. "What? But, but you do so much!" Fundy perked up, his eyes lifting from the ground.

Tommy struggled for a second to think of an example. Like, what did Fundy do, actually? He had absolutely no idea, but Fundy was staring at him expectantly.

"All of those new policies with the church, that was all you! I can't believe you're so unappreciated!" Fundy was nodding along with his words, looking a little vindicated.

"That's what I always say! I deal with so much stuff, policies and services and cults, so many *fucking* cults--" Fundy cut himself off with a sigh, "--I'm sorry, I shouldn't be telling you all this. You're just a kid."

Tommy sent all of the indignation and resentment he felt at that particular statement into his next words instead of just glaring at Fundy. "Don't apologize! You're totally in the right here. I won't stand for it. You'll get the credit you deserve if I have anything to say about it!"

Fundy nodded at him again with a smile that was half amused and half sad.

Prime, this was too easy.

Step 3, beg.

Now, Tommy would usually never resort to this. He was much too powerful to beg. But this was a special scenario, and he was not Tommy in this situation, he was his wealthy alter ego Thomas, so he made an exception.

"Would it be possible if I could just shake your hand? Please?" Tommy asked, looking up at Fundy innocently. Fundy frowned, hesitating.

It wasn't enough. He wasn't convinced.

Tommy pushed further. "It would make this whole thing worth it if I could tell my mother I officially introduced myself to *the* Archbishop. Please?"

Fundy faltered. "I really shouldn't..."

Tommy stared up at him with sad, wide eyes.

He saw the moment Fundy broke.

Fundy sighed, sticking out his hand. "Well, just this once...I suppose it wouldn't do any harm would it?"

Tommy lit up. His grin was real, for once, so infectious that even Fundy couldn't stop his own small smile from escaping.

He shook Fundy's hand with enthusiasm. "Thomas Clark, at your service."

"Fundy Foks, the fifth Archbishop of Manburg. Pleasure to meet you." Fundy replied.

And then it was done. The ring was in his hand, cold and metallic and real, and with another subtle movement it was tucked away in his pocket.

Tommy kept his smile plastered on his face, but mentally he was sighing in relief. The hardest part was over. He had the ring. Time to get the hell out of dodge.

Tommy took a step backward from Fundy, nodding his head at the man. "Speaking of mother, I best be off now. She's probably worried sick." It was a total lie, but it seemed like something a kid would say that could get him out of this conversation and Tommy knew Fundy was way too awkward to protest.

Fundy nodded, "Yeah, yeah, of course. Go ahead, kid." Tommy backed away, his eyes still on Fundy.

"Sorry again Mr. Archbishop!" Tommy shouted gleefully, unable to keep the smile from his face, "You've been more help than you could know."

Fundy shifted on his feet, looking uncomfortable at the attention Tommy's shouts were drawing, and gave Tommy a half-wave before turning back to the rest of the crowd around him. He didn't look back.

Yes.

Fucking yes. Prime, he was so fucking epic. Tommy fought off a whoop of victory, settling for a bright grin as he delved back into the crowd, worming his way toward the exit. Being cramped with all the people still majorly sucked, but he was too focused on how he was *literally the king of thieves* to think about how little breathing space there was as he snuck through the square. His hand brushed against the ring in his pocket and he felt another jolt of glee.

Not too far away, Tommy heard a sharp gasp, a faint exclamation of *my ring!*

The smile fell from his face. Dear Prime, the universe hated him.

He forced himself not to look back at the sound. Fundy had noticed the missing ring much sooner than Tommy had expected. He needed to gain some distance.

"Somebody's got my ring!" Fundy shouted, louder this time, and the entire crowd seemed to go silent at once. Tommy got the strange feeling that they were almost anticipating his next words, leaning in as a unit to not-so-subtly listen in on the drama.

“Guards!” Fundy screeched, and he sounded panicked enough that Tommy almost felt bad for a second before he came back to his senses. Even from where Tommy was trying to slink his way through the crowd he could hear the pounding thuds of the guards’ boots as they swarmed to Fundy, and the sudden stop to the noise as they awaited their orders. “Find that ring. Search everyone in the festival if you have to but I want that thief brought to me!”

The congregation’s mood took an abrupt shift at the words ‘search everyone’, and quiet, uneasy murmurs filled the silence that had enveloped the square. Tommy noticed the Lights citizens near him begin to slowly edge away from where the cabinet was standing. Strange how they only seemed to like their private police force when it was being used to suppress people from the Slums, wasn’t it?

“They have to be somewhere in the square.” Fundy shouted, “Find them! By whatever means necessary.” The crowd was roiling with unease now, a few brave voices crying out their protest.

Fundy turned sharply at the shouts, glaring into the crowd. “*No one* leaves until we find that ring.” He waved a hand toward the guards.

Well. This seemed like a good time to go.

Screams rang out as the guards began to prowl through the square, yanking citizens toward them at random and searching their belongings. Everyone was streaming the other direction now, scrambling to be out of the reach of the guards, and it wasn’t hard for Tommy to join the flow of people. More shouts sounded from behind him.

Curiosity burned in Tommy’s chest. He knew he should focus on his escape, but part of him sort of wanted to see the guards scrambling to search for the ring, the panic as Lights citizens finally understood what constantly evading guards felt like. For some reason seeing the chaos caused by his hand, well, it would be satisfying. Justice finally served.

Tommy couldn’t help himself. He glanced over his shoulder.

The square was a panicked, jumbled mess. Schlatt was nowhere to be seen. Through the chaos Tommy spotted a flash of scarlet and he focused in on it.

Fundy’s gaze scanned the square, desperately searching for whoever had dared to steal from him. For just a second there was a break in the crowd, a gap in the swarm of people.

Fundy’s eyes locked with his. They both froze.

For a moment they just stared at each other, sizing each other up. And then the moment was over and Fundy’s brow wrinkled in confusion and he shook his head faintly and he began to turn away and *holy shit did this guy not get it?* Because maybe Tommy was going blind or some shit, but from where he was standing it looked like Fundy, the Archbishop of Church Prime, the third-ranked member of Schlatt’s cabinet had just brushed Tommy off, had just decided that *no*, there was no way *he* was the thief, he was just a *kid*.

Prime, if that didn’t piss Tommy off. The theft he had pulled off had been *art* and this man had the *nerve* to ignore Tommy’s masterpiece? To just assume he couldn’t have pulled it off? How *insulting*.

Maybe it was technically safer that way, without Fundy recognizing that he was the one who pickpocketed his ring. Maybe he should have just been glad that his disguise had worked so well. But Tommy just couldn’t get over the way Fundy had...ignored him. He hadn’t even gotten a second glance.

Fundy was a right prick, Tommy decided for reasons completely unrelated to his bruised ego, and he needed to give credit where credit was due.

So before he could think it through, before he could realize what a horrible idea it was, Tommy whipped the ring out from where it had been hidden in his pocket and held it up to the sky. The silver glittered in the

sunlight.

He could see the exact instant when the metallic glint caught Fundy's eye. The man froze mid-turn, his entire head twisting back towards Tommy sharply as his eyes locked on the silver ring between Tommy's thumb and forefinger.

His eyes flicked from Tommy to the ring to Tommy and then back again, like his mind was struggling to process the new revelation. It would be a lie to say Tommy didn't enjoy the way his eyes widened in shock.

Fundy took a single step in his direction before the crowd crashed back down around them like a wave, a wall of people descending between the two. His eyes fell to survey the river of people separating them and then flicked back up to Tommy. Even from across the square Tommy could see the steel in them, the determination that lay there. He wasn't giving up.

Prime, this guy was really attached to his jewelry, wasn't he? Fundy took another step in Tommy's direction, clearly prepared to struggle through the tide of the crowd if he needed to.

Well. That was probably Tommy's cue to head out.

He gave the man a little salute, flashing a victorious grin. Fundy's jaw dropped.

Never taking his eyes from the Archbishop, Tommy took a step backwards, then another, and the crowd swallowed him whole.

Chapter End Notes

Shameless plug part two incoming, brace yourselves
I stream on twitch [here](#), maybe go check me out?

Sorry this took so long to post, this chapter was three times longer than usual--but I promised a heist so a heist you shall receive.

Hinted at some future stuff in this chapter too, anyone catch it? :))

Thanks again for all of your wonderful comments!

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

The aftermath

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The call was answered not a second after Tommy hit the start button.

"Theseus!" Wilbur sounded breathless, expectant.

He was awfully chipper for someone who had essentially told Tommy to go fuck himself not a day earlier. It made Tommy glance up from where he was fiddling with the ring in the palm of his hand.

"Wilbur." he greeted in response, only half-paying attention. He knew the drill for these check-in calls by now. It wasn't like they had much to talk about other than the job, so Wilbur kept to a pretty predictable routine--insult Tommy, inevitably bicker with him for a few minutes, pester him with questions about his progress, maybe throw in a lecture about how important the job was without ever really explaining *why*, and then sign off with a single, sharp nod.

Normally Tommy would just sort of sit there and put up with it, but after a long day of running around the Lights, stealing from high-ranking government officials, and missing his favorite day of the year in East Side for a ring that, frankly, wasn't even that impressive, he was *tired*. He went back to playing with the ring, his fingers tracing the dark swirls etched into the silver. He could just tune out Wilbur's chatter until he got to actual important stuff.

An idea hit him--what were the odds Wilbur would notice if Tommy, say, took a short power nap in the middle of their call. Like really, other than their arguing he hardly let Tommy get in a word edgewise, would it be that much of a difference if he just didn't speak at all? Like, on one hand, Wilbur would definitely get all worked up if he found out, but on the other hand... sleep. Sweet, sweet sleep--

"Well?" Tommy jumped at the words, looking up again to see Wilbur leaning towards the camera, eyes wide and questioning, his voice impatient.

Why the fuck was he looking at him like *that*? Tommy couldn't remember school all that well, but this felt vaguely like the time his tutor had called on him to present and he had forgotten to write a final paper in the first place.

"Well, what?" Tommy tilted his head in confusion. Had he missed something here? It felt like he had missed something here.

Wilbur gritted his teeth. "Well, do you have it?"

Tommy prickled in irritation, the nervousness receding just a bit, because really, the man was just bringing it on himself at this point. Could he be literally any less clear with his questions? Tommy had no idea what he was getting all riled about, and frankly he was way too done with everything to deal with it.

"Bitch, the fuck are you talking about?"

Wilbur stared at him like he had gone insane. Tommy bristled at the disdain in his gaze.

“What the fuck do you *mean*, what am I talking about?!” Wilbur’s voice was edged with panic, “Did you fucking forget your entire job?”

His job? What the hell did his job have to do with anything? Did Wilbur want a status update or something? Like, it was pretty obvious that Tommy had gotten the job done, or else why would he be in the call in the first place? Even Wilbur couldn’t be so dumb as to think--

Well. Actually. Best to double check.

“What, the ring?”

And Wilbur snapped. He stood abruptly, slamming his palms onto the desk. Behind him, his chair toppled over with a crash. “Yes, the fucking ring! *Do you have it*, Theseus?”

“Yes!” Anger bubbled up in Tommy’s chest, fiery and swift.

Who did this guy think he was, coming into the call with these vague-ass questions and expecting Tommy to know what they meant and then getting all pissy whenever he didn’t. Prime, Wilbur the Bitch only reinforced his namesake with every new interaction they had.

“*Of course*, I have it you massive fucking *dick*,” Tommy screeched, glaring at the ceiling, “Prime, you come around here with your stupid, smug face and those dumb glasses and think everyone has mind powers or some shit, expect me to just know what you’re talkin’ about like *oh I am Wilbur and I am so smart and I say big words to confuse people* like give me a fuckin--” Tommy glanced down at his laptop screen and froze.

Because Wilbur was smiling. Holy shit, he was *smiling*.

And not one of those smug, self-satisfied smiles that made Tommy want to punch him or the reluctant half-smile he gave Tommy when he said something that even Wilbur had to admit was funny. This was a real, honest to Prime smile, with teeth and everything, his face lit up with a genuine, warm glow, his eyes crinkled in happiness. It made him look like an entirely different person. A *nice* person.

What the fuck. What the fuck was happening.

“You really have it?!” Wilbur asked, grinning, albeit still a little uncertainly, and if this was any other time Tommy would feel a little indignant at the incredulity in his tone.

As it was though, he couldn’t seem to do anything but stare in shock at Wilbur, who was still shining that megawatt smile at him with such raw, unfiltered joy that Tommy felt like he was being blinded.

Tommy thought he had learned how to handle Wilbur, that their calls had clued him in on all of Wilbur’s moods, but *this* was a whole new beast. This was unnerving. Terrifying. He and Wilbur only ever argued. How the fuck was he supposed to talk to him, like, normally? What was he even supposed to say?

“Yes?” He tried, and if Tommy had thought Wilbur’s smile was startling before, this was ten times worse.

The man whooped with glee, punching the air with his fist, practically jumping up and down with his excitement.

Tommy watched silently, shaken, his thoughts racing past in a panic as his eyes traced Wilbur’s movements. He danced around the camera screen, his hands moving animatedly as he talked to himself excitedly.

“Fuck yeah!” Wilbur shouted gleefully, and then he turned toward the camera, still smiling like an idiot, “Well done, Theseus! Well done!”

And something warm and safe and horrible welled in Tommy's chest, a tiny spark in his hollow heart, because something in the words sounded almost proud, and Tommy didn't know why but suddenly he couldn't help but want Wilbur to look at him like that *all* the time, with that gentle smile and proud eyes.

It was stupid, he *knew* it was stupid, because Wilbur was clearly just celebrating, clearly just riding the high of this victory, and the moment the dopamine wore off he would go back to glaring and yelling and ordering him around with his usual icy intensity. Hoping for anything more was utterly pointless. Still, he couldn't help the tiny, sad smile that spread across his face, couldn't help but wish...

No. He cut that thought off. No.

Focus. He needed to focus. He couldn't fall into their trap. He had a plan here and he wasn't going to abandon it because Wilbur had decided to *smile* at him.

This--this had to be some sort of manipulation technique or something. Lure him in with a smile and get him all attached or something...so he would be less alert for when they finally turned on him. Yeah. That sounded about right. They wanted him to let his guard down.

Well, Tommy wasn't falling for it. He doused that stupid little spark in his chest with a bucket of ice water that he liked to call *reality*.

Overpower, outsmart, exploit. That was the plan and he was sticking to it. No matter what.

Wilbur finally seemed to calm down a moment later, the wave of excitement reaching its end as he picked his chair off the ground, setting it upright before practically falling into it.

"You actually got it. I wasn't sure if you would, you know." He sighed deeply, happily, like a weight had just been lifted from his shoulders, smiling fondly. "Of course, you had to keep me in suspense too. Playing dumb as usual."

Wilbur had said it in an almost friendly (the fuck?!?) manner, but a spark of indignation lit in Tommy's chest.

Was that what Wilbur thought? That this was some sort of *joke* to him?

He raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't *playing dumb*, asshole. You really think I would be on this call right now if I hadn't managed to pull it off? Fuck no. Especially after last night. What were your words again, *don't bother showing up unless you have that ring?*"

Wilbur had made it perfectly clear Tommy wouldn't be welcome if he failed to get the ring from Fundy, so why would he even try to make another call unless he had retrieved it? So he could get yelled at again? Maybe beg at Wilbur's feet for a second chance? As if.

He would rather just take his losses and move on.

And it's not like the Antarctic gang would have recruited him for another job if he had screwed up the very first one. By telling him not to show up Wilbur had really just been doing him a favor, speeding up the process. Even if he had been sort of a dick about it.

Though, to his credit, Wilbur seemed almost...guilty? That was probably just wishful thinking, but at the very least he appeared to have picked up on the bitterness in Tommy's tone, the smile fading from his face.

"About that..." he said, turning away from the camera. His hair fell over his eyes as he glanced downward and he shifted from foot to foot, cracking his knuckles.

Oh Prime. Wilbur was nervous again. This didn't bode well.

"My...colleagues informed me I may have *slightly* overreacted yesterday." Wilbur stared at his feet, his mouth set into a firm line, "I was on edge for the job and I let it get the best of me."

Tommy's jaw fell open.

Someone coughed pointedly in the background, and Wilbur flashed a glare somewhere offscreen.

"And I shouldn't have taken it out on you and I won't in the future." he added reluctantly.

The call fell silent. Tommy stared in shock.

Not for the first time that night Tommy wondered if someone had kidnapped Wilbur in his sleep and replaced him with this happy-go-lucky doppelganger. There was absolutely no way that *Wilbur*, the proudest fucker Tommy had ever met (excluding himself) had just *apologized*.

For a moment Tommy seriously considered the Wilbur-napping theory as a legitimate possibility. *Wilbur would never admit he was wrong*, half of him argued.

The other half disagreed. *I mean, it was a pretty shit apology. Even Wilbur could probably manage it*, it pointed out, and Tommy was forced to agree--that whole speech and Wilbur still hadn't said that he was sorry. Sure, it was *implied*. But he hadn't actually said the words even once.

Like, Wilbur probably wasn't too used to admitting fault, and he supposed it was technically the thought that counted, but still. That was sort of lame.

Still, the man looked sort of pathetic, sitting there and waiting for Tommy to accept his half-apology.

Tommy reluctantly decided he would not be just a big man but a bigger person. Just this once.

"Uh, yeah." Tommy coughed uncomfortably, "Sure. Epic."

Wilbur smiled again. Tommy shuddered at the sight.

Wilbur, clearly eager to move on from his semi-apology, spent the next half an hour trying to get Tommy to reveal how he had pulled off his heist.

Tommy didn't budge. Not only would telling Wilbur about the whole "pretend to be a sad child" part of the plan probably bring up some issues about his real identity, but, in hindsight, it also probably hadn't been the best idea to taunt Fundy and he *really* didn't feel like getting scolded about that.

Wilbur would probably make a way bigger deal out of it than it actually was--sure it had been pretty dumb to reveal his face to the man who had the capacity to have him hunted down and excruciatingly tortured, but realistically there was absolutely no way of Fundy actually finding him. All Fundy really knew was Tommy's face--not his name or his age or even where he actually lived in the city, and there were thousands of other blonde haired, blue-eyed kids in the city. What were they going to do, hunt down all of them?

It wasn't like they could trace him back to Theseus or the Antarctic gang either, so he was safe on that front too.

And really, Fundy would probably forget about this whole ring thing in a day or two anyway. The man was one of the richest in the city--he could get more rings than he could ever desire at the snap of his fingers, what did he really care about one ring in particular?

It wasn't like it was anything special. From what Tommy could tell it was a completely normal, perfectly ordinary ring.

Which he had to admit, confused the hell out of him. He had assumed the ring had some special significance, some vital importance, otherwise why would the gang put him through literal hell to get it? It had to do *something*.

The gang had never actually explained why they needed the ring so badly, but that really only went to support his theory--of course the gang wouldn't tell him if the ring was like, some sort of weapon of mass destruction or something.

They were probably hoping if they didn't bring it up Tommy would be dumb enough or naive enough to just not mess around with the jewelry at all. If so, they failed. Miserably. It did nothing to dissuade Tommy from trying to figure out the ring.

And, boy oh boy, had Tommy tried.

He started by searching for a switch on the ring, figuring there was a hidden compartment beneath one of the massive sapphires in the metal that would pop open if you hit a lever.

Absolutely nothing.

Next he traced the intricate designs on the band, checking for codes hidden in the dark swirls on the metal. It was clear of anything except for small etches of random animals--a pig, a sheep, a crow, and a fox, and Tommy couldn't imagine *that* held the secret message he was searching for.

At that point he was admittedly getting a little frustrated, and completely gave up on handling the ring with any semblance of care. He switched on the electricity in his staff, threw the ring on the ground, and stabbed at it, hoping the ring was some high-tech gadget that he could fry.

Still nothing.

So he got more creative. He spent an hour trying to pry the sapphire out with his screwdriver. He started a small (perfectly safe) trash fire and chucked the ring into it. He grabbed the only hammer he owned in a fit of blind rage and bashed it against the ring until the head of the hammer snapped off the handle, sending a puff of wood shavings into the air like a mushroom cloud.

When the dust cleared there hadn't been a single mark on the damned thing.

At that point he saw he only had fifteen more minutes until his check in call with Wilbur, realized he had spent the entire afternoon trying to crack the stupid ring instead of just sleeping, and promptly gave up. It was pointless. He was convinced the ring was either completely useless or completely indestructible.

But no way was Tommy telling Wilbur that. He knew from past experience (see: getting shot at by angry customers) that no client wanted their business pried into. That never stopped Tommy of course, but even so he wasn't dumb enough to go around advertising the fact that he snooped into the illegal and/or dangerous dealings of the people who hired him.

That would probably get him either promptly murdered in his sleep or out of business. Which was insane. People needed to chill.

Like hey, sue him for being a little curious, right? How could they blame him for wanting to know what he was getting himself into?

But again, no way was he going to say that to Wilbur, so every time the man asked a question Tommy dodged it like a champ. Half an hour of interrogation later and Wilbur still had absolutely nothing.

He must have eventually gotten tired of going in circles though, because he finally moved on. "As far as delivery, you can hold on to the ring for now. You'll be retrieving other valuables in your next jobs, and we'd rather just collect everything all at once. Security and all."

Tommy hummed his agreement. He had been expecting as much. Repeated deliveries would make him much easier to track.

"Your payment will still be delivered, of course. The transfer to your account should be complete any minute now. Four thousand Primes, as agreed."

The Primes. Holy shit, how had Tommy forgotten about the Primes? And four *thousand* of them too. That was-- that was enough for him to pay off Dream, he realized. And then after his next job....he would have money to spare. Tommy was, frankly, shook. This had never happened before.

From outside his room someone pounded on his door, and Tommy hastily muted himself in the call, his eyes shooting towards the entrance to his room in alarm. His mind flashed back to Fundy, staring at him from across the square with determination in his eyes. That couldn't possibly be...

"Tommy!" Skeppy's muffled voice shouted.

Tommy's shoulders relaxed incrementally. "Just a minute, big man!"

He turned back to the laptop, unmuting himself. The interaction had been brief enough that Wilbur didn't seem to notice it, thankfully. He didn't need the man to ask more questions he couldn't answer.

"So what's next, then?" Tommy asked eagerly, already imagining the knife sets he could buy with four thousand more Primes.

Wilbur just shook his head with a fond grin (Tommy shuddered. He was still getting used to *that*). "Not today, Theseus. I can't imagine getting into that festival was a pleasant experience, so I'll let you off the hook for now. Go ahead and take a break. You deserve it."

"But--" Primes. Money. New knives.

"Nope!" Wilbur said cheerily. The screen went dark. Tommy glared at it indignantly.

Fucking Prime, how many times was this asshole going to hang up on him? This had to be like the fifth time.

A series of knocks came from Tommy's door again and Tommy remembered Skeppy was still waiting out there for him. He pushed himself out of his chair.

"Skeppy, my man!" Tommy shouted, throwing the door open with a grin, "What's on the menu for today, we trolling on Bad or--"

A hand clamped down on Tommy's shoulder, hard enough to bruise. Tommy flinched. His eyes trailed up the hand to the arm to Skeppy himself, who was glaring down at Tommy like...like he was about to hurt him.

"Shut. Up." Skeppy gritted out. Tommy paled.

Something was wrong.

Tommy had never been scared of Skeppy before.

Uneasy, yes. Mistrustful, for sure. But not once in the seven years they had known each other had Tommy ever been *afraid* of him.

Until now.

Because Skeppy was looking at him like he was the scum of the earth. Like he wanted to *kill* him.

Tommy's mind short-circuited at the expression. Even when they fought Skeppy had never looked at him like that. Never.

The first tendrils of dread began to claw their way up his throat.

"What the fu--frick--you know what screw Bad's rules, what the *fuck* are you doing?" Skeppy hissed, and it pushed Tommy over the edge. The grip around his shoulder, the fiery rage behind his amber eyes, the hostility of his tone--it was all starting to feel a little too much like the Quackity Incident, except this time Quackity wouldn't be there to swoop in and save him.

Fight or flight kicked in, emphasis on the flight. Tommy thrashed under his grip.

Skeppy shoved him against the wall of his room. "Stop moving!"

Tommy went still. Skeppy glowered down at him.

"You know," he started angrily, "Bad has done so much for you. Took you in when you were nothing. An orphan on the streets and he was the one who gave you food and warmth and a roof over your head. And, out of the kindness of his fucking heart, he ignored that we were giving up part of our bakery. He didn't mention when you would disappear for days at a time without a word. Hell, he even turned a blind eye to your 'activities' in the Underground."

If it was possible, Tommy paled even further.

Skeppy laughed darkly, "What, you thought we didn't know? When we can hear your footsteps on the roof in the dead of night, when you come back here with bruises covering your body? You thought we couldn't tell? And even with all of that, I was fine with turning a blind eye to it because *Bad* was fine with turning a blind eye to it. I was *fine*. But I am not going to stand here and let you put my *home* in danger so you can get your kicks being a street criminal."

This was okay, Tommy tried to convince himself. This was okay because it was fixable. Skeppy thought he would lead enemies back to him and Bad--and Tommy *wouldn't*. It was why he was so careful, why he always wore a disguise for his work, to keep them from tracing things back to them. Surely Skeppy would accept that. Surely he would understand.

"Skeppy, you don't, you don't understand," Tommy pleaded, "I've been safe, I've been careful, it wouldn't be traced--"

"Then why are there warrants out for you across the city!" Skeppy yelled, throwing his hands in the air.

Tommy froze. "What?"

"The entire city is plastered with warrants for a blonde kid with blue eyes. Supposedly pretty agile, young, skinny. Sound familiar?"

Tommy's mouth opened and closed like a fish. Skeppy's eyes bored into him. "Funny thing, I came up here this morning to see if you wanted to go out on the streets with me and Bad. Imagine my surprise when there was no sign of you. And then, not hours later, I get word that a thief that looks exactly like you stole a piece of *priceless* jewelry from the *Archbishop* in Schlatt's *fucking* square, and better yet, there's a warrant out for this kid's immediate capture."

He looked down at Tommy coldly, "Care to explain?"

And Tommy couldn't. Because it was his fault, wasn't it? His recklessness that had caused all this.

"I--I didn't know. I made a mistake, but I never do that Skeppy, never, and they won't be able to trace me back, I can lie low for a few days, and everything is going good, I've been getting actual *Primes*--"

"I don't care!" Skeppy screamed. "I. don't. care. Bad is the best person I've ever met. He would, he *has*, done everything to help you. And you go and betray him like this? By putting him in danger for what, a few Primes? You would sell us out like this?"

No, Tommy would *never*. Skeppy still didn't understand. The Primes were a nice bonus, sure, but Theseus was more than that. It was how he was going to escape from Dream, it was how he was going to escape from the Slums. It was how he was going to get *out*.

"You don't get it, Skeppy." Tommy tried to explain, "You, you don't understand. You said it yourself, I was *nothing*, but I'm *not* anymore, Skep. This is how I'm getting free of here, this is how I'm doing something. All I want is to do *something*."

"Oh, would you just shut it!" Skeppy cried wildly, "You're *never* going to get out of this place. No one does. So stop pretending you're something more because, news flash, you're not! All you'll ever be is some thief in the streets, so fucking let it go already, before I kick you out and you really *are* on the streets! Don't you have everything you could possibly need here? We take care of you. Haven't we given you enough? Fucking give it up!"

The nervousness, the frantic explanations, all of it died at that. Because how could Skeppy say that to him? How could he threaten to kick Tommy to the curb in one breath and then promise him protection in the next? His own anger rose to match Skeppy's.

"A-And what?!" Tommy screamed back, "Count on you? You just said you would throw me out onto the streets! The only person I can count on is myself, so don't fuckin' lecture me on being responsible!"

"I will, because you aren't!" Skeppy yelled, "All you do is run around and take things without any consequences and think that it's all one big game. You have no idea what it's like out there in the real world!"

How--how *dare* he? How dare he insinuate Tommy was naive when he had been out there, working himself to the bone, and not just for himself.

Tommy wasn't dumb. He saw how the bakery struggled to stay afloat. He had snuck in and stashed part of the payment from his jobs in the register for *years*. He fought off the thieves who wanted to break in each night.

And Skeppy had the nerve to tell him that he didn't understand how things out there worked? That he was selfish?

Tommy's voice went quiet, fierce. "I was out there for months, *months*, before Bad found me. I know what it's like out there, and even once you guys throw me out on my ass, I'm *never* going back. *Never*. I need to have something for myself.

Skeppy scoffed. "Something for yourself. You'd better hope those guards don't show up or you'll have a cell all to yourself." Skeppy said coldly, his eyes hard with sincerity "Because I'll turn you in the instant they do."

And Tommy's heart dropped like a stone, because even if he knew, all this time, that Skeppy and Bad didn't care about him, he had still been holding on to that last thread of hope, that maybe, just maybe, it wasn't all

a kind front. That deep down, he mattered.

But no. Skeppy didn't care. Because turning him into the guards was a death sentence, and Skeppy knew it.

Something like hopelessness crawled up his chest, twisted its way around his heart, curled around his lungs. Suddenly, nothing seemed to be working any more. He couldn't quite breathe.

He couldn't convince Skeppy, he wouldn't listen, he didn't care. He couldn't do anything.

So he turned and he ran.

Tommy slept on a rooftop.

It was cold and wet and miserable, because of-fucking-course that was the day it decided to rain, but there was no way in hell he was going back to the bakery, not when Skeppy was still there.

Tommy wondered if he was still lurking outside his door, waiting for him to give in and trudge back in defeat so he could threaten him some more. He wondered if Skeppy would be worried when he didn't come back at all.

Probably not. He hadn't seemed much worried when he had threatened Tommy, what difference would there be now? Still, he couldn't help but imagine Skeppy, pacing the bakery, feeling concerned for him, regretting ever yelling at him in the first place. He would be lying if he said the thought didn't make him feel just a little bit vindicated.

He spent the entire next day keeping his distance, numbly stumbling the length of the slums without any real purpose, until eventually, reluctantly, returning to the bakery.

He couldn't miss his check-in with Wilbur, after all, and he hadn't had the foresight to grab his laptop when he made his mad dash across the rooftops. Not to mention literally everything he ever owned was in the storage room. His return was inevitable.

And maybe Skeppy knew that too, because when he passed the bakery he could see Skeppy and Bad laughing together inside of it. He couldn't help but hesitate at the storefront for a moment, watching them together. They looked so...happy. Even without him. Especially without him.

In a break in the conversation Skeppy must have spotted Tommy from his peripheral vision, because his eyes snapped to meet Tommy's with a sharp, scalding glare. The message was clear. *Stay away.*

Bad didn't seem to notice the exchange at all, nudging Skeppy's shoulder with a grin as he pointed at something in the bakery's display case. With one last parting scowl Skeppy turned back to Bad, the smile plastered on his face in an instant.

A clear dismissal.

Tommy might not have the highest emotional intelligence, but even he could take a hint. So numbly, robotically, he climbed back up to his room, switched on the voice modulator, and joined the call that Wilbur had started five minutes earlier.

"Late." Wilbur announced with a smug grin, "Don't know what else I should've expected from the likes of you."

Tommy couldn't find it in himself to respond.

Wilbur's grin fizzled out. "Right." he mumbled, coughing uncomfortably, "Okay. Well, Theseus. Have we got a job for you."

Chapter End Notes

First Sam and now Skeppy?? Tommy's father figures are dropping like flies.

And Tommy doesn't know how to handle affection from Wilbur? Hahahhaha I'm not projecting YOU are.

As always thanks for the lovely comments! Reading them is literally the best

Cant believe I missed my chance to have the word count be 42069. Guess we'll have to go for 69420. See you soon :))

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Tommy's next heist, gone wrong

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy was lost. Hopelessly so.

For once, it wasn't his fault. The vents stretched on forever, twisting and turning and plummeting dozens of feet without warning. It was a labyrinth. Anyone could have gotten turned around.

Not Tommy though. Tommy had studied and studied and *studied* the schematic to be sure of that. No room for mistakes with this job, not when he was breaking into the most high-security tech companies in Manburg, so for once in his life he had prepared, studying his route and memorizing security camera locations and, more than anything, poring over the building schematics for hours and hours on end.

And the schematic was wrong. The *fucking* schematic was *wrong*.

He'd paid a good price for it too. A fair price. Needless to say, *that* particular source would *not* be getting his business again. In fact, he was feeling much more inclined to finding out where the dickhead lived and breaking some things. For putting him through *this* shit, some payback was due.

Well. If he even made it out alive to get it.

Prime, he should have just stuck with information from Purpled. Purpled had never screwed him over, not once, and even though he was *technically* in the business of traps (and the shiftiest, most unbearable fucker Tommy had ever met), the kid was a surprisingly good information source. Tommy went to him for almost all of his bigger jobs. He normally would've gone to him for this one too.

But then Tommy's cautiousness caught up with him and he had started to worry that going to Purpled for information on two of the most high-security locations in the city in the span of a week might be enough for the kid to start connecting the dots.

Purpled was just too nosy for his own good. Every other information dealer understood the unspoken rules of the Underground--Tommy bought the information he needed and then he got out, no questions asked. He was just another face in the crowd of their usual clientele, and they had a policy of remaining intentionally unaware of their clients' criminal activities.

Purpled had no such policy. He would notice Tommy's suspicious activities and he would start asking questions, and then it would only be a matter of time before he read between the lines.

And even if Purpled *technically* hadn't screwed him over yet, Tommy didn't doubt that he would sell him out without a second thought if he knew Tommy was Theseus. He was the most sought after thief in the Underground, after all. People would pay a lot of Primes to know his identity, and Purpled was, above all, a businessman.

So in the end he hadn't gone to Purpled, and now he was paying for it.

“Fuck!” Tommy said to himself, wincing when his voice resounded through the vents, echoing off the cold metal. He thought back to the guard he had knocked out with his staff earlier in the evening, remembered that there were more like him patrolling the halls somewhere below him.

He lowered his voice to an angry whisper. “Fuck. *Fuck.*”

Even if he remembered the way he had come (he didn’t), there was no backing out now. He had to do this job tonight. It was one of the few things Wilbur had made perfectly clear--it *had* to be tonight.

Everything else was half-explained, vague: how he was supposed to get in (*that seems like your job Theseus, not mine*), whether he would run into any guards (*I mean, you can fight, right?*), what he was actually supposed to be stealing (*powerful microchip--it’ll be in a briefcase, you’ll know when you see it*), where he could steal it (*eh, somewhere in the building*). Yes, Wilbur, the building that was forty stories tall and half a block wide. How helpful.

But no matter how much Tommy had pleaded over the week leading up to the heist, Wilbur didn’t give him anything else. All he told him was it had to be that night.

So now Tommy was stuck in the vents of the (creatively named) TechCorp building and out of options.

Except for one. Keep going.

And that would mean finding his way out of the vents at some point. Searching for the right way was hopeless now that he knew the schematic was fucked; staying in the vents would only waste time.

Yes, leaving the vents was an entirely logical decision, and it most definitely did not have anything to do with how suffocatingly tiny they were.

They were big enough for him to fit through, thankfully, or he'd have an entirely different problem on his hands, but he was barely able to fit crawling through on his hands and knees. Frankly, it didn't do wonders for his nerves. He'd only been in the building for two hours and already he'd had to stop twice to collect himself.

But he didn't have any longer to waste. The sooner he got out of the vents the better. Tommy chose a random direction, and began to crawl.

It took him another hour before he found a vent grate.

One long, arduous hour that brought two more nervous breakdowns, many, many whispered curses, and enough crawling that he could see chronic back pain in his very near future. But even once he had found the grate there was another problem.

Getting down.

He couldn’t see much through the slits in the vent except a few flashes of a white tile floor that looked to be about fifteen feet down. A long fall for sure, but more importantly it meant he had no idea what he was walking (falling) into. The room could be a guard break room for all he knew. Or a weapons testing lab.

But no fucking way was he spending another hour in the vents trying to find a better option. He was already far enough behind schedule--by his estimate it was already 0300, and he needed to be out of the building by 0800 when it would be flooded with employees. He couldn’t wait any longer.

So with a grunt of force he wrenched open the vent cover, careful to set it down softly so it didn’t clang against the vent. He peered down at the floor below.

Prime, that looked far down. Like, *really* far down. Tommy swallowed.

No, no he could do this. He had to.

So carefully, hesitantly, he lowered a leg through the gap.

He waited a minute. Two. There were no calls of alarm, no shouts of surprise.

Enough stalling.

He put his other leg through the hole and lowered himself through the gap, shifting his weight from his upper arms to his elbows to his hands as he tried to keep from losing his grip and plummeting to the ground.

Finally, after nearly a minute of trying to maneuver out of the vent, he was hanging from the ceiling with his hands, his body stretching toward the ground. All he had to do was let go.

Tommy didn't want to. The floor still looked way too far down.

His arms were getting tired. His left hand began to cramp.

With a quick prayer to Prime, Tommy closed his eyes and let go.

He landed with a thud, his ankle twisting sharply under his weight. Tommy bit his lip to keep from yelping in pain.

He ignored the twinge in his foot as he straightened, rolling his ankle against the ground. It was manageable. He could handle it later. For now, he still needed to be on high alert. He scanned the immediate vicinity for any signs of life.

There were no guards in sight, thankfully. Tommy was in his usual heisting outfit--ratty black cargo pants and a leather tool belt, a dark cape with a hood covering his hair and shadowing his face, a black mask over his eyes. Not exactly an inconspicuous look. If Tommy had known he would be dealing with *guards* he would have worn something that didn't scream *I'm here to steal things* quite so much.

Although he supposed it didn't quite matter. If he was spotted, he didn't think the guards would hesitate to ponder his outfit. Either way he'd be shot dead.

The thought sent a new sense of urgency shooting through him. He needed to get a move on. The guards would still be making their rounds through the building--they could be heading in his direction that very instant. He glanced around the room, hoping for some clue on where exactly he was.

The room looked like a lab--pristine, white walls, shiny marble countertops, television monitors with dark screens spanning an entire wall of the room. Against another were vials of bright, colorful liquid spread over rows and rows of shelves. Tommy stayed far clear of them. The last thing he needed was to accidentally spill some bioweapon and end the world for a second time.

He crept toward the glass door of the lab, peering at the hallway outside of it. The same spotless white walls. Glossy tile floors. A camera whirled from where it was perched on a wall, rotating back and forth to get a full view of the hallway.

See, this is why he wanted to stay in the vents. He wouldn't have to worry about security cameras and guards and shit in the vents. Now he had an entirely different problem.

How the fuck was he going to get around the building?

An idea hit him.

The last week had been consumed with preparing for the job. It wasn't like there was much else to do. Usually he would go pickpocketing if he got bored, but with his face still plastered on fliers throughout the city, that was a no-go. And there was nobody else he could hang out with.

Sam wouldn't open his door, no matter how long he sat outside of it. Skeppy wouldn't meet his eyes. He had even gotten desperate enough to brave a visit to Quackity, but the casino had been despairingly empty.

So he threw himself into his work, studying and memorizing and agonizing over all the details, and it had all turned out to be pointless because the plan had gone completely out the window the instant he realized the schematic was wrong.

That didn't mean that he hadn't still picked up a few useful facts along the way, though. Namely, that the guards didn't patrol the staircases of the building. Instead, the employee files showed guards were assigned by floor each night, with two guards patrolling each level.

TechCorp probably figured it was a waste of time to have their guards check the stairs when they could be protecting the actual technology in each floor. And now they were going to pay for it.

If Tommy could figure out where the staircase was and then make it there without being spotted by any of the guards or security cameras he would be home clear. Free to move up and down the building as he pleased. He would still have to be quiet of course, and he wasn't looking forward to climbing forty flights of stairs, but it was better than nothing.

A key part of that plan, however, was figuring out where the staircase actually was. Which wouldn't be a problem if he hadn't just dropped into Prime knows where because he had spent so long studying the schematic--but oh wait, it actually didn't make a difference because *the schematic was wrong*.

Tommy may still have been just a little bit bitter about that.

So now it was mostly down to guesswork. Since the top secret weapons lab didn't exactly have visitor guides at every corner, he was basically just going to have to check every room until he found the stairwell. And he was going to have to do it without getting sighted by the guards or security cameras in every hallway.

Luckily for him he knew they had a blindspot--the cameras whirled back and forth across the hallway to get a full panoramic view, but they couldn't quite catch a good visual of anything directly beneath them. As long as he timed it right, Tommy could make it to the blindspot before the camera caught sight of him.

Not wasting any time, Tommy pushed open the glass door to the lab while the nearest camera was facing the opposite direction and sprinted to stand directly beneath it. When it had turned the other way he sprinted to a new hallway.

And so the process repeated--slide past a camera's blind spot, pause to listen for guard's boots against the tile, and then silently check every room he stumbled across, peeking through doorways until he finally opened a door to a dank, grey stairwell. Brown concrete stairs spiraled upwards.

There was no wall through the center of the staircase, just a gap, so when Tommy tilted his head back he could see the flights, twisting and turning, back and forth, until it all blended into one gray blur hundreds of feet above him.

Prime, he was going to be sore tomorrow.

Tommy had absolutely no clue where the fancy briefcase he was trying to steal was located, but he had a few guesses. At the top of the list was the fortieth floor, the CEO suite. The briefcase was clearly important, and where better to keep important things than with the head of the company?

So that was his first stop. If that didn't pan out he would just work his way backwards.

He heaved a sigh. This was going to suck.

He started climbing.

An hour later Tommy had finally gotten to the fortieth floor, and it was safe to say he was not a happy camper. His legs felt like they were about to fall off. His ankle was throbbing.

The whole thing had been painful, but the last few floors to the top had been literal hell. Tommy had considered chucking himself into the gap in the stairwell for the sweet mercy of death. Multiple times.

But now he was done and he was never going to climb up another fucking stair in his life.

A thick lock held the door to the stairwell fastened tight. Tommy sighed. The CEO probably had a special access card for the elevator and didn't want any of his employees getting any ideas.

Maybe if he wanted his office to be safe he should have picked a better lock. This would take Tommy two minutes to crack, tops.

He pulled a lockpick out of his toolbelt and got to work. Sure enough, it wasn't a minute later that the door opened with a soft click.

His boots sunk into thick red carpet as he stepped through the doorway and into some sort of lobby area. Other than a quick scan for any security cameras, Tommy didn't bother to look around--he was less concerned with the lounge chairs and metallic tables than the heavy wooden doors in one corner of the room. Perfect.

A second later he was met with the massive, sprawling CEO's office. The room seemed to stretch on forever, the walls hidden behind bookshelves filled with awards and paintings, mahogany columns supporting a ceiling decorated with intricate wooden carvings. Floor to ceiling windows stretched across the far end of the room, looking out across the mid-ring of the city. They were silhouetted by a massive, dark desk.

Fuck. This was going to take him forever to search. He stalked towards the other end of the room and--

Tommy froze mid-stride. Slowly, carefully, he took a step back and crouched to the ground and stared at the spot he'd been about to step. A thin, almost imperceptible red line hovered above the carpeting. A tripwire.

If he had blocked the path of the beam...well, there's no telling what could have happened. Nothing good. Tommy stepped over the laser carefully.

Back to walking across the room, though considerably slower. This time he kept an eye out for any other hidden traps.

And then he saw it. Across the room, sitting in the center of the massive mahogany desk, right where he had expected it to be, was the briefcase. Wibur--he'd been plotting Wilbur's death when he said *you'll know it when you see it* in that condescending tone, but he'd been *right*. There was no way he could've missed it. Rich leather, trimmed in gold, big enough that it was covering like half of the entire desk--now that was an important briefcase if he had ever seen one.

Thank Prime he'd found it. He was starting to worry he would run out of time. But now the hard part was through. All he had to do was get back out of TechCorp undetected, and he'd already gotten this far, right? Easy peasy.

He strode toward the desk. Time to get the hell out of this Prime-forsaken building.

A buzz in the air. A flash of red in his peripheral vision. Tommy froze.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he looked downward.

His calf was cutting through a thin, red laser.

Everything happened at once.

Something popped, loud and metallic, and a bookcase on each side of him shifted, moving toward him just ever so slightly, just enough to make a thin, dark gap appear in the rich mahogany walls. Two shapes flew from the darkness, just silver flashes through the air.

Faint whirring filled the room and Tommy suddenly understood what was happening. The blood drained from his face.

Of course. Of fucking course the most advanced weapons lab in the city had more protection than a few guards. Why hadn't he thought of that? Of course they would have drones.

The bots were thin, smooth, and even from across the room Tommy could tell these weren't any ordinary search drones. They were too agile, too quick, flitting across the room like hummingbirds, only pausing to hover in the air every so often, facing toward him like they were peering at him, analyzing if he was a threat.

Tommy froze. Maybe they wouldn't notice him if he just...didn't...move...

His question was answered with a streak of neon red. Tommy only just managed to react in time, dodging as the beam whistled past his ear, a flash of heat and burning pain as it tore through the edge of his mask. The dark fabric fell from around his eyes. His hood drifted down from where it was covering his hair

Lasers. *Lasers?* Holy *shit*.

Another bolt flew towards him and Tommy barely darted away in time. Not a second later and his hand would have been a scorched stump.

Okay, fuck this. Tommy pulled his staff from his tool belt with a swish. It crackled with electricity.

He swung at the first bot and it flew to the side, swerving out of the way of his swing. A *zap* sounded from somewhere behind him and Tommy lunged to the left, rolling back to his feet as a laser flew past his shoulder. He threw himself at the other drone this time, slashing his staff down. The bot sizzled for a second as his hit landed before it faltered and crashed to the ground.

Another laser flew over his shoulder, crashing into a bookcase on the side of the room. In one swift motion Tommy turned and cut down on it with a single, vicious slice. The bot was still whirring faintly when it plummeted to the floor.

What the fuck. What the *fuckkkkk*. He needed to get the hell out of this place. In three long strides he was across the room.

He snatched the briefcase from the desk. It was surprisingly light in his hands.

Good. Great. He had the microchip. Time to fucking *go*.

Tommy raced for the door. It swung open before he could reach it.

"Hey Gerald, you alright in there? Another false alarm with the l--"

Tommy looked at the guard. The guard looked at Tommy.

“A thief?” His eyes widened. “Y-you’re just a kid!”

Okay. Fuck this guy. Tommy kned him where he knew it would hurt.

The man collapsed to his knees. When he looked back up at Tommy his eyes were no longer filled with that shock, that raw surprise that he had at first. No, this looked much more like rage.

Tommy ran.

Chapter End Notes

tommy in the vents *among us music starts playing*

here's our next chapter! can't say i'm a big fan of how this one turned out-- im so exited for the chapters coming up that i just want to write those chapters instead. big things up ahead...

take a look at some of the epic fanart made for this fic [here](#) by @xrayycoolguy on insta
check them out!

i absolutely love seeing fanart and reading all your wonderful comments, so thanks tons to everyone.
see you soon :))

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Tommy makes poor decisions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He was halfway down the first flight by the time the guard sent out the call for help, the shouts into his communicator echoing behind Tommy as he launched himself down the stairwell.

He was almost down the fifth when the alarm started to go off.

Shit. This was not good, not good at all. One guard he could handle, but now there were seventy-nine other security officers in the building all headed his way. He pushed his legs to move even faster, practically tripping over his own feet as he vaulted himself over the guardrails at each turn of the stairs.

He was flying down the twentieth floor when the first guard crashed into the stairwell on the floor below him, looking around wildly. It only took a moment until his gaze locked on Tommy, his hand flying to pull his gun from his holster. Tommy expanded his staff in the same instant.

The electricity flicked on. The guard aimed.

And then the gun was flying through the air, clattering down the stairs, and the guard was looking at his empty hands with shock. His eyes refocused on Tommy a millisecond later, already moving to lunge toward him, but by then it was too late. Tommy swung his staff again.

It hit the man's neck with a wild crackle, his eyes rolling back in his head as the electricity surged through his veins. His body shook--he stumbled forward once, twice, until he bumped up against the railing of the stairwell. And then Tommy watched as his momentum pushed him forward, and his weight leaned against the railing, and the guard tipped, slow and still and weightless, over the edge.

Gravity did the rest. The guard fell from view.

Tommy's legs wouldn't move. He stared at the spot the guard had once stood.

A thud echoed from somewhere far, far below him.

Tommy's eyes widened. He had fought and maimed and injured before, but he had never killed someone. It had never gotten that far. But...

That man was dead because of Tommy. He had just *killed* someone. Shock tore through him.

17 and a murderer, Tommy thought vaguely, numbly. He couldn't tear his eyes from where the man had fallen through the gap.

It was an accident, he told himself, *an accident*.

But it hadn't been, not really, and Tommy knew it too. He had known very well how narrow the stairs were, how low the railings stood, how dangerous the gap in the staircase could be, and he had still flicked on the electricity and brought down his staff.

It wasn't an accident at all. That wasn't even what had him so upset.

No, what bothered Tommy was that he couldn't find it in himself to feel that bad about it.

Which was horrible. He had just murdered someone in cold blood--that felt like something he should be upset over, something that should haunt him, but all Tommy could feel was wide-eyed shock and a smidge of guilt--not because a man was dead, but because he didn't really care that he was.

The guard had been coming at him, after all. What was he supposed to do? The guard would kill street trash like Tommy without hesitation--why would Tommy give him the courtesy of remorse? These were the same people who spent their days dragging kids from the slums to their execution, who had beaten him countless times without mercy.

So yeah, maybe it was fucked up, but eliminating one of the people out to get him didn't exactly send him to shambles.

Not that he was out to kill of course. Even he wasn't so detached, so vicious, as to do that. It just didn't mean he had to feel bad when he did.

The nearing sound of pounding footsteps dragged him out of his thoughts. How long had he been standing there? Too long, much too long. He needed every second he could spare.

As everything snapped back into focus, Tommy became aware of multiple things all at once.

Shouts--from somewhere above him, deep and callous and getting closer by the second. Doors slamming--from below this time, clanging as they were forced open, accompanied by the thumping of steel-toed boots against the stairs. And the door to the twentieth floor, on the landing a few steps below him, right where the guard had been standing before Tommy had sent him plummeting to his death.

The voice got closer from both directions, and Tommy realized that, fucking Prime, he was trapped. Fighting his way through was just not an option--who knew how many reinforcements were in either direction. Sure he could fight one guard, but five? Ten? And in the narrow staircase, with no room to swing his staff? He wouldn't stand a chance.

He looked at the door again. Only one way out.

Still, he hesitated. The tripwire drones had done a number on him--his mask had fallen from his face, his cloak was in tatters. The twentieth floor would surely have security cameras, and he didn't exactly have the time to find their blind spots. There would be no hiding, no disguising his face.

He waited too long to make the decision--the first guard rounded the bend in the stairs from above him with a growl, and Tommy turned around just in time to pull out his staff and swipe it at the guard's head. He crumpled to the ground a second later, his head hitting the concrete with a crack. A pool of blood crept out from under his body.

Tommy didn't stop to see if he was alright. He was out of time.

Another guard rounded a bend in the stairs, from below him this time, and before he could think about it any more Tommy pulled open the door to the twentieth floor and sprinted through.

He kept his head down as he ran, throwing one arm over his face to shield it from the cameras as best as he could, using the other to keep his grip on the briefcase. Boots pounded against the floor behind him, closing the distance by the second, and, holy fuck he was so incredibly screwed. He had no other plans, no other options now that the stairs were an impossibility, because other than jumping out a window and taking a quick death there was no other way to get down to ground level, nothing other than--

The elevator. Holy fuck, he was an idiot.

He hadn't used it earlier because it was too slow, not to mention probably equipped with security cameras, but that didn't really make a difference anymore did it?

So he kept running, just praying he would get lucky, twisting and turning through the hallways of the twentieth floor like a rat in a maze.

And then, after what felt like hours, he saw it. Like a beacon of light in a snowstorm, with sliding doors wide open, fluorescent lights shining down like a heavenly glow, like a gift from Prime itself: the elevator.

Tommy threw himself through the doors with almost inhuman speed, slamming his finger on the button for the first floor. He glanced up. Dozens of guards were there, because of course they were, cramming their way through the hallway, rushing toward him. He just couldn't catch a break, could he?

The guards drew closer. Tommy mashed the close button on the elevator door frantically, desperately, eyes flickering between the glowing button and the guards who were maybe twenty meters away. Now ten.

The doors began to slide closed. Tommy stood straight and watched, staff gripped in one hand, the briefcase in the other, as the guards drew closer, as the gap of space in the doors got smaller and smaller.

They were only five meters away now. Four. Tommy's hand tightened on his staff.

Three. The window was just big enough for a person to fit through, still sliding shut slowly. Too slowly. The shouts of the guards grew louder.

Two. The gap was just a crack now, just big enough for a guard to stick an arm through and stop the elevator. Tommy's entire body tensed, readied, prepared himself for a fight.

One. The guard at the head of the pack reached an arm out, his fingertips just inches away, getting closer and closer...

The doors slid shut.

Getting out after that was easy. Or, at least, as easy as escaping from an advanced weapons lab could be.

The guards didn't make it to the first floor until minutes after Tommy had gotten off the elevator, and it was just the head start he needed. The guards had the advantage of being familiar with the building after all, so despite the extra time he was still only barely able to find a side exit in the maze of hallways before they caught up to him. By the time he had actually gotten off the TechCorp property he had a whole cadre of the fuckers trailing him.

Which was, admittedly, not ideal.

Tommy had sort of been hoping the security guards would give up once he stepped off TechCorp grounds--technically their job was just to protect TechCorp, and look! He wasn't even there anymore. Running through the city streets chasing after thieves couldn't possibly be part of their job description. They should just go back to chilling in the building and pretending this never happened, and then, *voila*, everyone wins.

The guards did not seem to share these particular beliefs.

Tommy just couldn't shake them, no matter how much he twisted and turned his way through the streets of the Lights. They kept on his tail, always trailing a few dozen feet behind him, bullets whizzing past his head.

The beginnings of sunrise were just beginning to paint the sky orange, morning light not quite peeking over the Walls yet but making a valiant effort. It had to be at least 0600. The streets may have been empty, but they clearly wouldn't be for long.

So Tommy abandoned trying to outmaneuver the guards in the Lights and began heading due East. He would have to lose them in one of the lower-class districts.

The roofs got lower, the buildings tighter and less sturdy, the silver garnishes replaced by dull metal and then crumbling brick and then rotting wood until finally, *finally*, they were back in East Side.

The guards were still trailing behind him, trying to close the distance. He side-eyed the suitcase. Whatever was in there had better be fucking epic. Tommy honestly hadn't expected them to chase him this long for a single piece of tech.

But it was no matter. The chase wouldn't last much longer.

They were in his turf now.

Tommy grinned, just a little bit feral. He had spent years in these streets, running through the labyrinth of roads, finding the best rooftop routes for an easy escape. They didn't stand a chance. He hung a right at the next split off, turning rapidly into an alleyway surrounded by short, stout buildings. The perfect height for him to climb up.

The shouts of guards trailed behind him, signaling the change in direction, alerting the others. Tommy paid them no mind.

He chucked the briefcase up to the roof of the building with a wild throw before following after it, scrambling to the top of a dumpster, leaping to reach the ledge of a metal balcony, and then hoisting himself upward, swinging a leg up onto the rooftop and pushing himself to a stand. He turned to look down at the street below.

The guards hesitated. Tommy couldn't see their eyes in the dark, but he liked to imagine they were looking up at him, looking down at their stiff, formal, black-tie suit uniforms and then collectively agreeing *hell no*.

Holy Prime, this was now the second time he had outplayed an entire legion of these fuckers. He couldn't help the surge of arrogance that followed the realization--he cackled with glee, turning around to flip them off.

"Suck it, dickheads!"

A bullet whizzed past his ear. His grin faltered.

Maybe he should focus just a *little* more on not getting shot than reveling in his epic victory. He turned and sprinted into the sunrise, the briefcase bouncing through the air behind him.

Tommy was still riding the high of his victory, leaping from rooftop to rooftop with barely-concealed glee, when he spotted a flash of neon green in the alley below. And he was still riding the high of that victory when he realized said flash of green was actually Dream.

So, like an idiot, he made the decision to approach.

To be fair it hadn't seemed like a dumb idea at the time. He was on top of the world from pulling off his second big heist, the adrenaline rush had basically eliminated the pain from all of his injuries, he was about to be four thousand Primes richer--he was unstoppable. And Dream had no reason to be upset with him like last time--if anything he would be happy Tommy was finally paying off his debts. Dream had told him before, after all, how much of a nuisance he was to have around. He'd be *happy* to see him go. Tommy could fell two birds with one stone, finishing his job for the gang and finally paying Dream everything he owed him.

And maybe, just maybe...without his debts hanging over them, they could go back to how everything was before. When Dream wasn't someone to be feared, but adored. A friend. A brother.

So he cracked open the briefcase, shoving the contents--a single, tiny microchip surrounded by a whole lot of padding--into his tool belt without really even looking at it, and jumped from the rooftop to a nearby lamppost, sliding down the pole and falling in line with Dream as he stalked through the street.

He tugged at the man's hoodie eagerly. "Dream!"

"Not now." Dream snapped, speeding up his pace, not even sparing him a glance. Tommy was undeterred.

He hadn't made it this far by following the rules, after all. Forget playing it safe.

"I got it, Big D!" He chirped, lengthening his strides to keep up.

Dream glared at him from the side of his eye. "How many times have I told you not to call me that?"

Tommy's smile didn't dim.

Dream seemed to realize resisting was futile--he sighed, slowing down his pace, finally relenting. "What do you want, Tommy?"

"I got it! I got your payment, all those Primes." His grin brightened even more. "I got it."

Dream stopped dead in his tracks. Tommy nearly fell on his face trying to stop his momentum behind the man.

He finally turned to face Tommy, finally giving him full attention. "Already?"

Tommy nodded rapidly, bouncing on his toes.

An unreadable emotion flashed across Dream's face before his expression settled into neutrality. "That was fast."

He wasn't exactly wrong. A payment as big as this would usually take Tommy maybe half a dozen mid-level heists--months of work, weeks of going hungry. But with the Antarctic gang, it was...different. Better. Even if the jobs were a tad more dangerous.

Though he couldn't exactly tell Dream that. The man may have known about his identity as Theseus, but Tommy had been careful not to expose anything more. Knowing about the Antarctic gang would only give Dream more ammunition to use against him.

So he kept it vague. "Yep big man, I've been doing some new jobs, getting lots of Primes--and women, all the ladies love me, Dream--but also lots and lots of Primes. Enough to pay you back for everything."

"Yeah?" Dream responded, his voice sounding faintly...intrigued. "Then by all means, hand it over."

So Tommy began to rummage through his tool belt, searching for the Prime card that he had already preloaded his payment onto. "Right here big man, got them all on one card for when I met up with you, all five thousand of--"

"Five thousand." Dream cut in. His voice wasn't kind.

A sliver of uncertainty crept up his skin. Something about the way Dream was looking at him was...unsettling. Cruel, where he should be excited. "...yes?"

Dream was silent for one long, terrible moment. His eyes bored into Tommy, and Tommy couldn't shake the feeling that he had done something wrong.

His jaw tensed. "You're trying to cheat me, aren't you?"

He took a step closer to Tommy, looming over him. The shadows around his face deepened.

Tommy instinctively took a step back, instinctively went on the defensive. "Wait, what? No, Dream, what the fuck?!"

Dream took another step forward, his hand shooting out to grab Tommy's shoulder. "Is this some sort of game to you Tommy? You think this is fucking funny? You know very well you owe me ten thousand."

Tommy's head tilted in confusion, and then righteous indignation. "Wha--but, you said? You said five thousand!"

"And now you're lying to me. Have I taught you nothing?"

"Wait, but Dream, you fucking *said* five thousa--"

Dream threw his hands in the air aggressively, spinning on his heel to pace back and forth through the alleyway. "Prime Tommy, would you just give up with the lies? I have half a mind to just up it to fifteen for all of the trouble you're giving me. Is that what you want Tommy? Fifteen thousand Primes?"

And all that fiery anger was doused in an instant, replaced with the cold, ice sharp sting of panic. Fifteen--fifteen *thousand*? That would set him back weeks, months. He might not even *live* to see then.

"No! No, I don't," he blurted, "I don't."

But Dream didn't listen. His pacing got faster, more aggressive. His hands made sharp gestures in the air.

"And I've been so nice to you about this. I haven't even been charging you interest, and you turn around and do this?" Dream turned to face him with a cruel glint in his eye, his hand closing around Tommy's arm again, "Should I do that? Charge you for all the stuff that I've let slide? Ten thousand more, Tommy, and then your debt will be paid."

The words were strangely...familiar. They tickled the back of his brain.

It hit him --the last time he had met up with Dream. When he had said--

Wait a second. He was totally fucking right.

"Wait but--but you said that last time, right after... you *dickhead*! I was totally right you--"

"What did you say to me?" Dream asked, quiet in a dangerous way, his voice lethal. His grip was a vice on Tommy's arm. He shrunk back.

"I just meant--Dream you definitely said--I'm fucking right, I know it!" Tommy forced himself to stand up straighter, forced blue eyes to meet forceful green. "I gave you what I owed. I want my fucking discs back."

Dream was silent for a minute. Two. Tommy forced himself to hold his eyes.

"Okay."

"No! I'm not fuckin--" The words registered. "*What?*"

Dream shrugged, almost nonchalant. "Okay. I'll take you to them."

Tommy's mind short-circuited. "Dr--really?"

After all this time, could it really be this simple?

"You'll give them back?" The hope in his voice was a tangible thing.

"Yep. Follow me." He gestured with a hand towards Tommy, already turning to stroll down the street casually, contentedly. Tommy stared at his back for a moment as he walked away.

Now, Tommy wasn't stupid. Even with the adrenaline, the excitement from earlier, he wasn't so oblivious not to notice the sudden change in mood, the way Dream was almost unsettlingly calm about this whole thing.

But then Dream looked over his shoulder and smiled at him. A real smile. A kind smile. A smile from a different time.

Because months before Bad and Skeppy had ever even laid eyes on him, Dream had. And Dream had loved him. Cared for him. Picked Tommy off the street in his ratty old dress clothes and taught him how to fend for himself. Pickpocketing, misdirection, the rules of the Underground, everything Tommy knew was taught to him by Dream. But even then, it was more than that--Dream gave him a place to stay in his abandoned apartment building, had spared all of his blankets so Tommy could stay warm, had taken him climbing on the rooftops to watch the sunset together. For months on end, Tommy had been happy.

And then Dream had disappeared. One day he was just....gone.

And Tommy had looked for him. Searched every nook of the city, made his first contacts in the Underground, expended every resource he had--still not a trace.

But Tommy didn't give up. Even when he moved into his room at the bakery, even when he became Theseus, he hadn't given up. But he never found anything.

And then one day, out of the blue, Dream had shown up again. And Tommy had been happy, so unbelievably happy.

But Dream was...different.

By the time Tommy realized it was too late. Dream knew all about Theseus, knew all about *everything*, and had taken his discs, even though he knew, he *knew* how important they were.

It hadn't gotten better after that.

But still, despite it all, despite everything, Tommy still remembered. He remembered when they were brothers.

So when Dream looked at him like that, with that soft, gentle smile, Tommy didn't think. He just remembered.

And then he followed.

"Here?" Tommy glanced around the warehouse.

Dream grinned at him over his shoulder. "Yep, center of operations, Tommy."

"The big H-Q, eh? It's...." Tommy looked at the crumbling gray walls, the sickly yellow water spots on the ceiling, the clouds of grayish dust floating through the air. "Great. Epic. Very cool and rich and definitely

does not look like I'm about to be murdered."

Dream threw back his head and wheezed like Tommy had said something exceptionally funny. Tommy laughed along uneasily. He hadn't been joking.

Dream led him down more hallways, through twists and turns and dozens more corridors, until finally they came to a stop in a small, dimly lit room, barely big enough to fit the two of them. The only thing it contained was a single, massive safe, maybe half Tommy's height and twice his width.

"Here we are." Dream turned to him with a wide smile.

Tommy glanced around the room uneasily. "We stoppin', big D? In...here?"

"You got a problem with that?" Dream looked back at his face and burst into laughter. "Oh Tommy, you're not scared, are you?"

Tommy scowled. "No, I'm not some fuckin pussy, course not. It's just...small in here."

"I mean, you can wait outside if you're really that scared. You're disks are just in that safe, I thought you'd be able to handle it. But..."

Uh uh. No fucking way he was backing out now. He those disks and he wanted to see them now.

"No! No, no I can handle it, Dream!" he insisted. Dream smiled again.

"If you're sure..." He moved toward the safe, spinning the dial on it one way, and then the other..

"Fuck yes! I mean, yep. Yep, I am totally very cool about this, yes."

Dream fiddled with the lock.

"I bet you're excited." he added casually, "You haven't seen these disks of yours in what, five years?"

"Seven." Tommy corrected offhandedly, his focus locked on to Dream's hands, spinning that dial.

The door to the safe creaked open. Tommy couldn't quite see inside.

"Right in there, then. You earned it."

"Yes!" Tommy rushed forward, leaning into the depths of the metal safe, searching for his disks, his most prized possessions, the things he had been paying off Dream for years--

The safe was empty. Tommy blinked. He searched it again.

Nothing.

"Dream? I don't see any disks in here, I think you--"

Something hit his back and he stumbled forward. His knees hit the cold metal floor of the safe.

The door slammed shut behind him.

Tommy pressed a hand against the metal. It didn't budge.

"Hey, uh, Dream?" Tommy chuckled nervously, "I think you might've bumped the door or something, uh, I can't quite--" he took a deep, grounding breath "--get out."

Silence.

A possibility hit him, cold and striking, horrible and cruel, but *no*, Dream wouldn't do that to him, Dream knew how he felt about tight spaces. He had been so nice, so much like the old Dream, and he wouldn't *possibly*--

But the idea took root, twisting its way through his mind like vines, thorns sinking into his brain.

"Dream?" he asked, his voice wavering ever so slightly.

Dream hummed, tutting like he was scolding a misbehaving child. "Maybe this will teach you your lesson, Tommy."

"*Dream*?" More desperately now, the confusion fading, realization dawning, a pit of horror growing in his gut.

"Don't say it like that, like this is on *me*. You need to fucking learn Tommy!" Dream barked, "I told you, ten thousand was what you owed, and still, *still*, you fight me! I've been so fucking kind to you, have done so much for you, and all you can do is talk back to me."

The abyssal darkness of the safe swallowed him whole, dragging him down like a riptide.

Oh Prime. This--this was happening. Dream had locked him in. Maybe, maybe he could work this out. He could bargain. He was good at that. Surely Dream was joking. He just--he wanted an apology, and he would let him out.

"Dream, just, Dream let me out. I was wrong, I'll pay you, I'll pay you I swear."

"No!" Dream snapped, before lowering his voice "It's much too late for that. I--I can't fucking believe this. You know I was your only friend in this whole thing. I stuck by your side through it all, Tommy."

That was a lie. A boldfaced, dead-eyed lie, because he knew very well, they both knew very well, that Dream hadn't. For years, he hadn't. So despite the panic threatening to pull him under, he couldn't help the burst of sharp defiance that overcame him.

"That's--that's a fucking lie, you dickhead. You were the one--you *left* me. And then you come back and act like an ass and steal my disks and--"

Dream laughed, cold and cruel.

"I can't believe this! I *stole* the discs? I'm keeping them *safe*. For you!" Dream shouted, and Tommy's breath hitched, "Why do I even bother. It's clear you haven't learned your lesson."

He sighed. "Maybe a day or two in there will be good for you. Give you some time with your thoughts. Show you everything I've protected you from."

Tommy's heart stopped. Days? Days, *here*? The panic that he'd been trying so desperately to repress surged forward, clawing its way up his throat.

"Wait--wait Dream, no, no I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm wrong you're right I'm sorry, don't, don't leave--"

"It's too late Tommy. Don't worry, I'll be back." His laughter, sharp and cruel, seemed to echo through Tommy's head. "Unless I forget."

"Dream! DREAM!" he shrieked, "Don't leave me, please, *please* I'm sorry."

The man hummed condescendingly.

"This hurts me way more than it hurts you Tommy, just remember that." His voice was fading now, his words barely audible over the heartbeat thrumming through his head, getting more distant by the second.

And now Tommy was truly desperate, panic climbing up his throat, because the walls were pressing down on him and there was a tightening in his chest and everything was too *small*, and Dream, *fucking* Dream, was his only way out.

"Don't leave me here, please, I'll do *anything*! Don't leave. I'm sorry. I'm SORRY! Dream, DREAM! Don't...leave..." But his footsteps were getting softer and softer, despite Tommy begging, *pleading*, for him to stay, to not leave him here in this cold, tiny, crushing--

A door slammed somewhere in the distance. He was alone.

Tommy screamed.

And screamed. And screamed. Until his throat was raw and his lungs gave out and his voice was just a hoarse, haggard whisper, and even then his mouth was still frozen in a silent howl. For minutes. Hours. Days? It felt like an eternity. Dark, suffocating, empty eternity.

His head was in between his knees, his body curled into the tightest ball possible, when he heard it.

"H-hello?"

A voice. He was here. He was back. Oh Prime, he was here--to help him? He had to be here to help him, right? Dream, Dream had come back to save him, to free from this hell, just like he'd promised.

Dream's words from earlier flashed through his mind--*unless I forget*. What--what if Dream forgot him? What if he, oh Prime, what if he left him here again? He couldn't stay here for another eternity trapped in this cold, metal coffin.

Whispers, cries for help, bubbled up through a throat full of sand and shattered glass. "Dream? Dream, please, I'll be good, I promise, please let me out, please please please I'm sorry, I am, I'm sorry--"

The words were barely audible, little more than a whisper, but he had clearly been heard. A gasp echoed through the room, the thudding sound of items

"Oh--oh Prime," the muffled voice whispered, sounding a little nauseous, "Wait, one second, one second."

There was rustling from outside, soft footsteps, the clicking of metal on metal, and then--

A crack of light pierced the unending darkness. Tommy's head shot up, wild gaze locking on it. The door creaked open.

Tommy practically fell out of the open safe, scrambling away from it on hands and knees, desperately trying to get as far away from that cursed, fucking safe.

He was out. He was free. So why couldn't he breathe?

"Dream. Dream." Tommy repeated in between gasps of air, still trying to get his lungs to function properly.

"No?" A voice said timidly from above him. A deep voice. An unfamiliar voice. Not Dream.

"You--" Tommy breathed, "You're not him."

"No," the man laughed awkwardly, "I, uh, I'm not Dream."

Tommy's eyes lifted from the ground ever so slightly, locking on a pair of dark, shiny shoes, following them up to long, black pants.

"Who," Tommy gasped around deep, heaving breaths, "who are--?"

"Oh," the man responded, crouching down to Tommy's level, "Uh, I'm Ranboo."

Chapter End Notes

I can already see the "ranboo my beloved"s in the comments

you thought you escaped disk obsessed Tommy? hahahahah no.

recap chapter up next! should be out by sunday.

thank you again for all of the wonderful comments and especially fanart! check out some [here](#) by wackywasabi9 on insta

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Tommy gets an unpleasant surprise when he makes it home from his second heist

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Uh, I’m Ranboo.”

It took everything in Tommy not to scramble away. The man was close, too close, and Tommy wasn't sure he could handle a stranger touching him in that moment.

But the man made no move to reach for him, so Tommy stayed put. He had more important things to focus on--like not passing out. Black was still creeping around the edges of his vision, and rescuer or not, Tommy didn't want to be unconscious with a stranger.

Especially not someone so imposing. He hadn't gotten a good look at the stranger yet, but he could tell he was *tall*. Taller than him. By a lot. Even crouched down, the man towered over him, looming over his back.

Tommy wasn't sure how much he liked that. Threatened his big man status and all. He wanted out. He would already have left the stranger in the dust if he could.

Alas, Tommy's body seemed much more content to remain on the ground for now.

Which, like. Great. He was collapsed on the floor of an abandoned warehouse, unable to breathe, and now he had a stranger looming next to him on top of it all. Very epic.

But, to his credit, the man waited. He waited, a dark, steady silhouette at Tommy's shoulder, as he tried to force his lungs to cooperate. He sat there, quiet and still, as Tommy clenched his eyes shut and pressed his palms into the concrete so hard he knew they would bruise.

He waited, and ever so slowly, Tommy collected himself.

Tommy almost did a double take when he finally managed to look up at the stranger.

This Ranboo guy was, to put it lightly, messed up.

Half of his face, the right half, was normal--a little too thin, a little too tired, sure, but normal nonetheless. Just a brownish-red eye and pale skin and lips twisted into concern.

But the other half... Tommy paled.

Dear Prime, what had *happened* to this kid?

Because that was what he was, Tommy realized as he stared at him. A kid. He couldn't have been much older than Tommy.

And he was terrifying. Nightmarish.

From afar there was a chance he might have passed as ordinary. Someone could have mistaken the lines under his skin as thin, black veins, twisting under the left half of his face. But up close? Not a chance. They were too precise, too intentional, all straight lines and sharp angles, crisscrossing his face until it looked almost black.

Sometimes, when Sam was in an especially good mood, he would pull out a crate of ancient, scrapped electronics and let Tommy mess with them, fiddling with old resistors, touching his staff to LEDs and cackling as they exploded from the current, tinkering with half-working circuit boards.

That's what Ranboo's face reminded him of. A circuit board. A tangled mess of wires and ports, just under the surface of his skin.

His left eye, a bright, unnatural green, *glowed* in the darkness of the room.

Tommy thought he might be sick.

He almost flinched away from him. Almost.

But that would be fucking rude. Even Tommy wasn't *that* insensitive.

So he forced himself not to break the kid's gaze. "Tall motherfucker aren't you?"

"Uh." Ranboo shifted on his feet, clearly surprised with the question. His eyes drifted from Tommy's, glancing down at himself as if realizing it for the first time. "I guess?"

"Yeah." Tommy huffed. "I guess."

He looked away. He didn't think he could bear to look at the kid's face for another second, to wonder who exactly had done so much...*work* on his skin.

A pause. Tommy could feel those multicolored eyes, watching him. He could almost hear the kid arguing with himself, the struggle in his mind on how, exactly to approach the kid lying in a heap on his floor

And then, finally, after another painfully awkward moment of silence: "Listen man, are you, uh, okay?"

Tommy laughed humorlessly, still breathing a little heavily. He was hyperventilating on the concrete for Prime's sake. He felt like the answer was pretty clear. His eyes met Ranboo's with a grimace.

"Do I fucking look okay to you?" His voice came out garbled. His throat was like sandpaper.

Ranboo's eyes flickered to the yellowing bruises on his arm, the purple bags under his bloodshot eyes, the tattered hood, dotted with scorch marks, hanging over his shoulders. He winced, opening his mouth, closing it, and then finally settling on. "Yeah. Uh, right. That makes sense."

He pulled away from where he had been hovering over Tommy, climbing back to his feet, and holy Prime, if he thought this guy had been tall before, he was a literal giant now that he wasn't crouching down. Tommy leaned away from him ever so slightly.

"Do you want me to leave, or...? I'd just, I'd feel sort of bad leaving you like this. You look like...how long were you in there for, man?"

How the--it was pitch black in that safe, how the hell was he supposed to know? Every second felt like fucking eternity in that abyssal hell, and it wasn't like he had a watch or any way to tell the--

"Time."

It hit him in an instant. Fuck. "Time. Wh-what's the time?"

Ranboo blinked at him.

The confusion was justified, Tommy knew it, but he couldn't help the wave of urgency that gripped him, the frustration that bubbled up to the surface. He had responsibilities, obligations. The panic that he had worked so hard to stifle crawled its way back up his throat. Couldn't *one* thing go right today? He didn't have *time* for this.

But Ranboo just stared at him, clearly puzzled by the abrupt shift in tone. Tommy's patience ran thin.

"What's the time, idiot?!" he snapped.

Ranboo flinched away.

"Uh, like it was almost 2200 when I came here, but then I found you, and then we've been talking and..." he rambled, his hands fluttering through the air nervously.

"2200." Tommy echoed back, and a moment later the number sank in. "2200. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. You're sure?"

"I mean, yeah?" Ranboo replied, his expression morphing into panic as Tommy leveraged his arms beneath him, lifting himself from the ground, "Wait, wait, I don't think this is a good idea, you were in there--"

Tommy waved him off, hardly paying attention. With a grunt of effort he crawled to his feet, ignoring the way his arms shook as he pushed himself up. His legs weren't much better-- he stumbled through his first step, knees almost caving beneath him, and Ranboo reached out a gloved hand toward him.

Instinctively, Tommy stepped out of his reach. Ranboo retracted the hand.

"I have to go," Tommy ran a hand through his hair, already taking shaky steps toward the exit, "Oh fuck, Wilbur's gonna *kill* me."

His legs still felt a little bit like they might collapse beneath him at any moment, but with each step he took they regained a bit more feeling--soon enough he would be able to start running.

He leaned against the doorway of the room, looking out at the warehouse beyond. The building was probably on the far edge of the East Side based on the route Dream had taken him on--once he found his way out of the building it would take him, what, thirty, maybe forty minutes to get back? He could be in the call with Wilbur by 2300 if he hurried.

That was still two hours late.

He was so fucking dead.

And things had just been starting to get better with Wilbur too--they had a sort of casual rapport now, a pattern that they hadn't quite had before. They still bickered, of course, and Wilbur still maintained his aloof, pretentious air as always, but every now and then he'd crack a smile at one of Tommy's quips or rant about why it was a *good* thing anteaters had gone extinct in the Flash or praise breakthroughs in his research on the TechCorp building.

Tommy wasn't sure whether he liked it or not. It was...weird. Confusing. Deceptive.

Because Wilbur snapping at him before his first heist was still fresh in his mind. No matter what sort of pretense of friendliness he put up, Tommy knew all it would take was a single mistake before Wilbur went off on him again. And this was it.

It would be worse this time. Of that much Tommy was certain. In the three weeks he had been working with the gang he hadn't ever missed a call, had never even been more than a minute or two late, and even then

Wilbur treated it as a sign of irresponsibility, of disrespect. Even then, he lectured Tommy about it incessantly.

Two hours. He'd be lucky if Wilbur ever talked to him again.

"Uh, Safe Kid? Hello?" a voice asked from behind him and Tommy remembered that Ranboo, the guy who had freed him, the guy who had waited there while he had calmed down, was still there, still waiting to see if he was okay. Tommy glanced over his shoulder to see the kid looking at him with visible, genuine concern, like he was still worried for Tommy's wellbeing. Despite Tommy yelling at him and insulting him and being...being sort of a dick in general. He was still looking at him like he cared.

And Tommy, Big Man Extraordinaire, Master Thief of the Underground, felt a tiny, *tiny* twinge of guilt.

"Tommy," he whispered, voice soft, "My name is Tommy."

He hated the way that Ranboo perked up at that, like Tommy had given him something precious. Prime, he was an asshole.

He--he fucking hated this. He needed to get out of here. He had things he needed to do.

But first...

"Thank you." he said quietly, solemnly. Ranboo half-smiled at him and his face contorted with the movement, the lines on the left side of his face twisting in a way that had to be painful. Tommy felt a stab of...*something* in his gut.

He turned away.

The run to his room came in splintered flashes--stumbling out of the warehouse into the pitch black of night, ducking into shadows to hide from the sweeping beam of patrol drones, rummaging through his tool belt to check he hadn't lost the microchip, the faint glow of the bakery lights in the distance, and then closer, right in front of him. Another flash and he was throwing open the door to his room, half-falling into his chair, flicking on his voice modulator.

And then he was frantically starting up the messaging application, navigating to his and Wilbur's messages, trying to ignore how the bottom corner of his screen flashed 2303 up at him like a taunt.

Without a second thought he hit the button with the words *Join Call*, not even questioning that that wasn't how the app *worked*, that he would normally need to manually call Wilbur back, that this was *wrong*.

It wasn't until a moment later that he realized his mistake.

Because it wasn't just Wilbur he had to worry about. There were two people in the call.

And they were talking about him.

--why I didn't want to recruit him in the first place! No outsourcing, I said. No outsiders. Too risky, I told you, completely unnecessary, but you both *insisted--*"

"Phil had a point, Wilbur." A second voice cut in, dry, deep, blunt, and definitely *not* Wilbur.

And that was the moment Tommy realized he had fucked up. His eyes shot down to his laptop.

On one side of the screen there was Wilbur, in his usual outfit of a dark knit sweater and corduroy pants, his brown trench coat flapping behind him as he paced in front of the screen, clearly anxious about something. Normal enough. What wasn't normal, however, was the way Wilbur's tile only took up half of the screen. The screen was split in two today. There was a second tile.

It took Tommy's frantic mind a moment to connect the dots.

Two tiles. Two voices. A split screen.

Fuck. There was another person in the call. Someone Tommy didn't know.

The newcomer didn't have their camera on like Wilbur either. There was no intel to gather on their appearance, no way to commit their face to memory, no deductions he could make to find out who they were. The only indication of their identity was their username, in bright white text in the center of the second half of the screen--*T3chN0Blade*.

Now Tommy might have been relatively new to the whole Underground scene, but he had still been around. He knew the big names and faces of the major criminal trades--404, of course, but also Empress Alyssa of the Nether Faction, Callahan of the Harpocrates Cult, Connor, the head of the potion trade--and he had never, *never* heard of someone with a username like fucking *Technoblade*.

Major fucking red flag.

This guy was new. Unheard of. An unknown. And now he was talking to Wilbur. About him.

Red flag number two.

Tommy may have been impulsive, and he may have been panicked, but he wasn't an idiot. He kept his mouth shut.

"Of course you take Phil's side in this. Of course." Wilbur scowled, his hands curling into fists. He slammed himself back into his chair again.

"Don't say it like that. You know I don't like it just as much as you." The man sighed, "But Phil was right. We wouldn't be able to pull it off ourselves."

Wilbur's scowl darkened. "I can deceive people just fine. You and Phil are the best fighters in Manburg. One of us could have done it."

The best fighters in the city? And Phil as in...Philza?

Who the fuck *was* this guy, to be called the best in the city, to be compared to a leader of the most infamous gang in the Underground's history.

And more importantly, *why was he in this call?*

"Wilbur, you are the least stealthy person in this entire city. Phil doesn't have a thieving bone in his body. And I'm not exactly subtle." The man's voice was still the same monotone drawl as before, but Tommy swore he could hear a hint of frustration in his tone this time.

"We could have found another way! We could have found somebody, anybody, within our allies to pull it off. Not some random thief. I don't like it. I *never* liked it." Wilbur snarled, and suddenly everything clicked into place in Tommy's mind.

He didn't know how he hadn't seen it earlier.

The reason Wilbur had treated him so poorly in the beginning, how he could be set off at even the smallest of insults, the way he had enjoyed Tommy's discomfort and nearly cheered at each of his failures--it hadn't just been Tommy's imagination. Wilbur had never wanted him to be involved. The man really had just been hoping for his defeat all along.

He shoved down the tiny splinter of hurt that rose up at the realization. It was dumb and naive and pointless. He could deal with it later.

Another puzzle piece snapped together.

Philza. *This* was why Philza had been the one to contact him instead of Wilbur. Because Philza wanted him to be brought in to help, whereas Wilbur...didn't. What, had Wilbur refused to message him or something, so Philza had stepped in? That would be so...childish, though.

Tommy hesitated.

Yep, that seemed like Wilbur.

He tuned back into the call.

"You didn't seem to think that when he brought back Fundy's ring. Sort of seemed like you approved then." the other man retorted, "And you heard the rumors. He's a legend. He was our best bet."

Tommy's mood brightened considerably. His face lit up into a grin.

Well. Well well well. Maybe this new fella wasn't so bad after all. Legend, huh? He liked the sound of that.

Wilbur huffed angrily. "Yeah, and now look where that's gotten us. Theseus is probably out there, dead in some fucking ditch, or worse, the guards got to him and he's being tortured in Schlatt's basement, spilling his guts about everything, and now *we've* been fucking compromised--"

"Wilbur," the voice cut in, "We have a little bird listening in."

Tommy's heart stopped.

Wilbur's brow furrowed, his eyes drifting from the camera, down and down to the screen of his computer.

Tommy saw the moment he realized, saw his eyes go wide, saw his lips make a little round *oh* of shock. His mouth opened and closed helplessly.

Tommy might have laughed if his throat didn't still feel like fire. For once, Wilbur didn't have anything to say.

"Theseus?" Wilbur asked quietly. Softly. His brown eyes were wide and cautious.

Tommy stayed silent, gauging his reaction, but deep down he knew observing was pointless now.

He was spotted. It was undeniable. The gig was up.

Not much of a point in keeping quiet any longer, was there?

"Uh." he started, voice hoarse, and fuck, he should've planned something before he started talking, because what could he even say now?

"Hi." he finished lamely, and Wilbur sucked in a breath.

Tommy braced himself. This was it. The moment of truth.

Shock morphed to realization on Wilbur's face as he stared at the computer screen for a second longer.

"Holy shit, *Theseus!*" he shouted suddenly, and oh Prime, Tommy knew it was coming but he still didn't think he was ready for Wilbur to cut him off. Despite their arguments and insults and general dislike for each other, he--fuck it, he--Wilbur was *interesting*, alright?

He was petty and argumentative and stubborn, but so was Tommy, and Wilbur had this way of speaking, where the words seemed to just roll off his tongue. Every conversation was like facing-off for battle, a game of who could throw in the most backhanded insults, of who could force the other to crack a laugh, of who could win one of their petty debates.

In most of his business meetings as Theseus, Tommy was inattentive, half-listening to the same old spheel about where to pick up his objective and where to deliver it and *oh yeah, make sure not to get the attention of the guards* like he didn't already know all that, like he hadn't been pulling off thefts for years. He was bored.

But not with Wilbur. Never with Wilbur.

Tommy didn't trust him. Didn't like him. But Wilbur was interesting.

And he basically controlled Tommy's livelihood. And future. So there was also that. Now he had screwed it up. There was no mistaking Wilbur's tone. Tommy sunk his head into his hands and waited for the shouting to start.

Silence. Tommy peeked up at his laptop. Wilbur's eyes were wide.

"You--you're alive." Wilbur whispered shakily, and then, louder: "Holy--are you okay? Are you hurt?"

Oh. *Oh*.

That was...unexpected.

Was--did Wilbur--was he asking if *Tommy* was alright?

How was he even supposed to answer that? He wasn't--he wasn't okay. Not after everything.

But he couldn't tell that to Wilbur. How could he even explain it, his escape, the disks, *Dream*? No, it would expose too much, give too much away. But, but, let's backtrack here, Wilbur was asking if he was *alright*? Why would that matter?

"And--and the job. The *job*." Wilbur interrupted, running his hands through his long, dark hair. "Did--were you able to get it?"

Ah. There it was.

The job. Of course.

He should've known by now.

Wilbur didn't notice the strained silence.

"What am I saying, you couldn't have gotten it." he rambled, "You're late enough that something must have gone wrong. Were you captured by the guards or chased away from TechCorp before you even got in? Or, I know you were going to go through the vents, was the grate too high up and you were too weak to pull yourself--"

And Tommy snapped. "You did not--I am not fucking *weak*, Wilbur, I pulled off your first heist perfectly and now I, I show up a tiny, *tiny* bit late to your dumbass check in call and you assume I'm fuckin' dead. Perhaps I was just courting women or stabbing people or--you know I have a fuckin' *life* outside of your jobs right? I know you would love the full attention of a powerful and amazing man like me, but--"

"Theseus, I presume." the other voice interrupted dryly, "He's just as annoying as you told me, Wilbur."

Tommy saw red.

"I--I am not *annoying*." Tommy spluttered, his throat protesting with every word he said, "Who even *are* you, you massive fucking dickhead. This call is for me and Wilbur, not random fuckin' weirdos going around acting like they know things or shit. Who even--*Wilbur*, kick him off. He's a wrongun, I can feel it in my bones, Wilbur, kick him off the call."

"You do realize this is just proving my point, right?"

Tommy gasped indignantly. "This is not *proving your point*, fuck you bitch, if anything it's showing how awesome and epic and *right* I am, you--"

"Will you two *shut up*?" Wilbur hissed, "You're both adults, act like it."

The voice went silent. Tommy's mouth clamped shut. Yep. Adults.

Wilbur glared at the camera.

"Tech, stop provoking our contacts." The man--Tech?--huffed in annoyance. "Theseus, I won't be kicking anyone off. This is my...colleague."

His colleague? Tommy had been expecting something else--contact or employee or personal assassin, even. Not *colleague*. That implied they were on the same level, that they were almost equals, but...

For the second time that day Tommy's world shifted and clicked back into focus as the realization hit him.

The way Wilbur had spoken with him so casually, the way his words had been considered, both of them calling Philza by the much more casual name of Phil, something an underling would never call their superior...

"You're him." Tommy blurted out, his voice a broken rasp, "The third leader."

His mouth snapped shut. The call went silent.

"And how," the monotone voice said quietly, dangerously, "might you know that?"

He shouldn't have opened his mouth. Oh fuck, *he shouldn't have opened his mouth*. Literally the only advantage he had over the gang was information and he had just given everything he knew away in the dumbest of ways. Fuck.

Okay. He could get out of this. He could figure this out.

Think, Tommy, *think*.

He couldn't show guilt, that was for sure. That would only give away that he had been snooping around things he shouldn't have. Play it off casual, maybe? Act like it wasn't a big deal and maybe they'd believe it too?

"What, is it that surprising?" he wheezed, but it came out as a hoarse, pitchy croak. The laugh sounded forced to even his own ears.

Wilbur's gaze went hard. His eyes bored into the camera. "How. Do. You. Know?"

Okay, fuck, okay, they clearly hadn't bought that. Deception wasn't going to work here, but maybe he could downplay how much he had looked into the background of the gang. Make it seem like nothing big.

"I have my sources." he said cryptically.

Wilbur raised an eyebrow in disbelief. The other voice stayed silent.

And now Tommy was insulted, because even they couldn't think he was that dumb as to have gone into these jobs totally unprepared.

He snorted. "What, did you guys really think I would start working with the most legendary gang in all of the Underground and not do my research? I know my shit. Wilbur's a publicly known leader, so that's one. This Philza guy was the first one who messaged me, and you two have been calling him *Phil*, so he's obviously number two. And then there's you. Three."

The call was silent for another minute.

"Huh." the voice said, just a little bit of shock worming its way into the tone.

Wilbur blinked at him. "I mean, you're right. I just didn't think anyone--I mean, I guess...I guess I'll just let him introduce himself then."

"Nah." A pause. "Although...Your voice has been basically gone the entire call. You've been screaming. Why."

And the moment of quiet shock was over. In a flash Tommy was back on the defensive.

"Wh--of course I haven't been screaming, you massive dickhead." Tommy's voice cracked on the last word and he flushed. Really wasn't helping his case right now, was he? "I've just been a bit...sick, is all. But I suppose the great and mighty leader of the all-powerful Antarctic gang couldn't do something as lowly as feel human pain, so you wouldn't understand."

"No." the man cut in sharply, "The hoarseness, the inflections, I recognize it. You've been screaming. Why have you been screaming."

...

So that was terrifying. *I recognize it*, what the fuck did that mean?

Tommy glanced at Wilbur. He was leaning forward, eyes narrowed, clearly interested in where the conversation was going. He wouldn't be any help here.

Well. There was only one other thing to do. Deny.

Deny, deny, deny. There was no other way out of this. The gang couldn't know about Dream.

"I haven't been--"

"Were you compromised?" the man asked pointedly, and, well, not *technically*, unless you counted getting chased by dozens of guards and getting trapped by Dream being compromised. That didn't count, right?

"Well, it *depends*--"

"Why were you late?" he interrupted again, and Prime, Tommy was starting to get tired of this guy and his whole interrogation shtick. If he would just let him *explain* instead of cutting him off every *fucking* time

maybe they would actually be getting somewhere with this conversation.

"I ran into a bit of...trouble." Tommy began, "Completely unrelated, mind you, nothing to do--"

"Nevermind. I have enough." the man cut in, *again*, "It's clear you were caught trying to retrieve the target and held in captivity, though I have no idea how you managed to escape the guards. Unimportant. What's relevant here is that you haven't gotten my microchip, so I think I'll be seeing myself out if you don't--"

"What, no--fuck you, *I have it*." Tommy blurted.

For like the seventh time that day, the call went dead silent. A minute went by. Then, two.

Wilbur was the first to break the silence.

"The microchip." he said slowly.

Tommy nodded. "Yes."

"From TechCorp." Slower this time, like he thought Tommy wasn't understanding what he was saying.

Tommy scowled. "Yes."

"You got it."

"Fucking--is my microphone not working or something, are you not picking up what I'm saying here? *Yes*, I got the microchip."

Silence. Fucking Prime, it was like he had broken them or something.

"Huh."

A pause. "It's Technoblade. By the way."

What the--he actually went around calling himself *Technoblade*?? Tommy had assumed it was just a cool looking username, not something he actually-the fuck sort of name was *Technoblade*?

He almost asked as much out loud, but before he could Technoblade (*such* a dumb name), the man himself, jumped in.

"Nice job, Theseus."

Tommy shut up after that.

"Oh, another thing!" Wilbur shouted out of the blue later that night, interrupting Technoblade, who was asking Tommy questions about how exactly he had infiltrated the highest security weapons lab in the city with little success. "I've got you a gift."

Tommy was immediately on high alert. No one in the history of anyone had ever said that in a good way.

"What." he asked suspiciously, eyeing Wilbur's grin.

"Oh, don't be like that, Theseus," Wilbur said, "It's a good gift, really."

Tommy's eyes narrowed. "Uh huh. *What*, Wilbur."

"Well I was thinking--if you run into trouble it'd be helpful for us if we could find you, you know?"

This sounded...bad.

Tommy's face shuttered. He didn't respond. Wilbur's grin became a little more uncertain.

"I just mean, we can't have you deliver anything yet, and if you ever do get compromised, we need a way to get our stuff, right? So, I've made an emergency beacon for you."

Tommy didn't even have to think before he responded. "No."

"It would be a way for us to--"

"Nope." Tommy said again, because no way was he giving the gang another in, another way to find out more about him. No way this thing was legit.

"It wouldn't even track your location unless it is activated, so you wouldn't have to worry about your location being given away, or--"

Tommy scoffed. Like he would believe that. The gang could make as many promises as they wanted, but they didn't really have a way of backing them up, did they? They could put cameras or listening devices or a tracker in the so-called emergency beacon, and he'd have no way of knowing. "I said no, I don't want a fucking emergency beac--"

"He wasn't asking." Technoblade interrupted sharply.

"Well I don't fucking need--"

Technoblade made a noise that sounded vaguely like a growl. "I don't care. It's a requirement of the job. Either take the beacon or quit."

Well. Fuck.

"Fine." Tommy huffed.

The first hints of a smile began to spread on Wilbur's face. "Splendid."

Tommy couldn't resist one last jab. "But I'm not going to be fucking using it. Ever. There's not going to be any emergency situations. I haven't needed your help yet, and I won't need it ever. Just so you know."

Wilbur just shot the camera a smug grin. "I'll send you the details on where to pick it up. And I'll be seeing you tomorrow for our daily check-in, preferably not hours late this time, yeah?"

Tommy nodded. "Sounds good, Wilbur."

He was reaching for the end call button when Technoblade spoke. "Wait. One last thing. We have your next job."

"Well, let's just hold up for a second here, Technoblade. Theseus has been running around all day, planning, stealing, shouldn't we let him take a day to rest or recover--" Wilbur cut in, hastily, his face pinched.

Technoblade huffed irritably. "We don't have time for that. We have a schedule to keep."

Wilbur shrugged. "I'm sure the schedule could be *adjusted*--"

"Wilbur." Technoblade snapped, and Wilbur went quiet. "*Your* idea. Yours. Remember?"

Tommy had no fucking clue what they were talking about, but he didn't dare ask. It was clearly a point of contention between the two.

“Yes, but--”

“It’s okay.” Tommy interrupted.

Wilbur scowled. “Theseus, stay out of this--”

"I'm ready." he said again, because he was. Or at least that was what he tried to convince himself.

It didn’t matter. He needed more Primes anyway. Just in case Dream showed up again.

"Yeah Wilbur, he's ready." Tommy could almost hear the smug grin in Technoblade’s voice.

"Fine. Whatever." Wilbur bit out, "But I'm not going to be the one to fucking tell him."

"Sure.”

"Fine." Wilbur snapped again, before turning to Tommy with a frown.

"For the record, I'm sorry." he said, and without another word his icon disappeared from the call, the tile that usually held his face going empty.

And then it was just him. And Technoblade. Alone.

"So," the man started, and Tommy could hear something feral in the word, "What do you know about the Walls?"

Chapter End Notes

take your 3/4 crumbs. munch munch.

things are amping up huh? if you think this chapter was insane, just wait until next chapter. very big things ahead.

tiny small little plug for my discord--the link is below, but we have an open world 1.17 server for everyone to play on

as always, thank you for the wonderful comments and fanart, they literally motivate me so much! :))

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Will the third heist be Tommy's last?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

At this point Tommy was convinced the gang was trying to kill him.

It made sense, didn't it? The jobs they made him do were all risk, no reward. First it was pickpocketing from the third-ranking official in Schlatt's cabinet for a useless *ring*, then it was stealing from the most highly-guarded lab in the entire city for a single, unimpressive microchip, and now *this*?

Well, he would be lying if he said he hadn't lost just a little faith in the gang's motives. They were sending him into deathtrap after deathtrap. They had to have realized it was a miracle he wasn't dead, yet they kept giving him more impossible tasks.

And coupled with his most recent realization about Wilbur...

It didn't exactly add up to a pretty picture.

And it wasn't that Tommy was dumb, or naive. There had never been any delusions that he and the gang would be all buddy-buddy when everything was said and done. In fact, he had expected a betrayal once he finished working with them. With all of the insider information they had exposed on their top-secret organization, a stab in the back was inevitable. He had prepared for it.

But he hadn't thought anyone from their organization would be actively rooting for his failure *during* his work for them. That was a whole new beast.

It wasn't like he was unfamiliar with the whole *client trying to murder you after you finish getting them what they need* thing. Apparently, a lot of people seemed to think it was easier to murder *him*, the thief who was literally known for pulling off impossible jobs, than just, you know, *paying him*. Like, a *lot* of people. So Tommy had made a habit of being skeptical any time he worked with gangs. Trusting their power-hungry leaders, buying into their empty promises--it only led to close calls and unexpected betrayals. No thank you.

It was better to assume everyone had bad intentions so you weren't surprised when it turned out they wanted to kill you. Tommy had learned that the hard way--it had taken three minor stabbings and a near-miss with one particularly overeager assassin and his battle axe for it to really sink in.

But again, usually the murder attempts came *after* he finished his job with them, not while it was still happening. *This* was unheard of. *This* opened up a whole new range of possibilities, a whole new selection of ways they could arrange for his death. Methods that he hadn't prepared for.

Worse, it meant he had yet another thing to watch for while he was pulling off the actual heists for the gang--because now any new job could be a trap and he'd have no way of knowing.

He should have quit the instant he learned Wilbur had it out for him. There were already so many red flags--the vague half-answers to his questions, the unclear instructions for each job, the way they hadn't even specified exactly how long they would need to keep him under their employment--and now, on top of it all,

was the knowledge that Wilbur would legitimately be happier if he was dead. Anyone with half a brain cell would have dropped out the moment they realized.

But there he was, standing in the streets of the Bordertowns as the last beams of sunlight sunk behind the Walls. He still wasn't quite sure why.

Maybe it was arrogance. Tommy always had been just a little too reckless for his own good, had never quite known when to stop. Maybe that reckless need for *more* was finally about to catch up to him.

Maybe it was desperation. Dream hadn't been seen since the fateful day he had locked Tommy inside the safe, but he would show up eventually, Tommy was sure of it, and he would want his Primes. And the last thing he needed was a repeat of The Incident.

Or maybe it was just pure stupidity.

But he was there. And he was ready.

Sort of.

The streets here were somehow worse than the dredges of the slums, the cobblestone roads twisted and crumbling and strewn with gaps, moss and wheatgrass climbing its way up through the cracks. Trash littered the ground, scattered through the narrow street: a yellow evacuation notice drifting through the air a small, beaded bracelet abandoned in the street, a discarded Prime card, wedged between a gap in the stones-- Tommy picked that one up and tucked it into his utility belt.

Every so often he would spot a lone shoe, abandoned on the stones, the owner nowhere in sight. He eyed a small, rusted stroller, toppled on the side of the road, half-covered in rubble, dirt turning the once-pink frills a repulsive brown. A single, metal wheel spun in the wind, creaking mournfully. Tommy tried not to think about what had happened to the baby.

The buildings weren't much better, if you could even really consider them buildings. They were more of ramshackle huts than anything, cobbled together from crumbling brick and rotting wood, leaning in towards the street at such a dangerous angle that it was a miracle from Prime that they were still standing at all. The windows, what few of them existed, were either completely shattered or tinted so dark that they were nearly black, just dark enough that Tommy couldn't quite see what lurked beyond.

Most concerning of all, nothing moved. Save for the paper scraps floating through the gray air and the slight sway of the buildings in the wind, the street was consumed by a suffocating kind of silence, the kind of quiet that seemed to press down on his chest and suck out his soul. His soft, lonely footsteps echoed through the eerie road.

Even with the silence he knew he wasn't alone. He could feel the gazes locked on him, staring at him hungrily, from the moment he had stepped out of East Side territory. The buildings were probably crawling with people by now, their eyes eagerly following the stranger who had entered their realm from behind the dark glass of the windows. But the streets themselves? Entirely empty. The place was a ghost town, and with good reason.

East Side may not have been all sunshine and rainbows, but it was nothing compared to *this*. Only the truly desperate chose to live here, the poorest of the poor.

The Bordertowns--so aptly named because of their close proximity to the Walls--were nothing short of a nightmare. Hopelessness could drive people to extremes--shit went down. Thefts, murders, arson: you name it, and it had happened in the Bordertowns. And at a significantly higher frequency than what usually took place among the lower classes.

Worse, the area was perpetually hidden in the shadow of the Walls, towering just a few hundred meters out, casting the entirety of it into deep darkness for the vast majority of the day.

And constant darkness, constant fear of both the people inside of the Walls and the creatures lurking just beyond them...well, it screwed with people's minds.

Tommy had only run into Bordertowners a few times, but none of the experiences had been what he would call pleasant.

Everyone from here was, frankly, just a little disconcerting. Always a little too shifty for his liking, their nails long and jagged and more like claws than anything else, their eyes frantic and unfocused. Always looking at him in that way that made him feel like they'd rip out his throat at the first sign of it being beneficial to them.

There was a reason Tommy didn't visit the Bordertowns.

He kicked at pebbles along the street as he hiked, scuffing his boots against the cobblestone as he did and then listening to the rocks skitter out across the ground ahead of him. He kept his eyes low, toward the ground. Looking down at the street, searching for pebbles, was much better than the alternative.

Another thumb-sized rock appeared in the edges of his vision and he swung his leg at it, listening idly as it skittered and skittered and *thudded*.

Fuck. That didn't bode well.

Tommy looked up.

The building had been utterly demolished, the rubble half-spilling onto the street, obstructing his path with thick beams of wood and chunks of broken rock.

Tommy sighed, disappointed but not surprised. These were the Bordertowns, after all. It would have been naive to expect anything else.

There was no point in even trying to get around it--the street had been completely blocked by the wreckage. And there was no way he was going into the shadowy depths of the buildings that boxed him in on either side, not when he could still feel curious eyes peeking out at him, burning against the back of his neck. He had to go through.

It seemed his lucky streak was over.

He hoisted himself over the first beam, swinging a leg over the side before carefully setting his foot down on the flattest spot he could see. With the long, treacherous night at the Walls looming in his near future the last thing he needed was to twist his ankle.

He picked his way through the rubble, climbing over rocks and ruin, carefully avoiding the splotches of dark liquid that had dried on some of the scraps. It was a long, arduous process, and all along the ruins of the building were always there, burning at the back of his mind until he could stand it no longer. He tore his gaze from the ground and looked over.

If at one point there had been a second floor to the house, nothing remained of it now.

The beams of the building were broken in a way that could only have been made through brute force, snapped sharply, neatly, like the foot-thick logs were nothing more than twigs. The one wall that remained half-standing on the other side of the lot had a massive, gaping hole in it, straight through the brick, twice as tall as him and three times the length of his arm. Like something massive, powerful, *hulking* had thrown itself at the wall with such force that it had just collapsed through.

Tommy swallowed. Best to move on. He had gotten his look. Lingered was always more dangerous.

He forced his gaze back to the ground. He didn't look back.

And so he continued, twisting and turning down the narrow street, failing to stumble on even a single living person, until the buildings began to grow sparser and sparser, the spaces between them stretching further and further apart until he only came across the occasional lone dirt hut.

And then, precisely a kilometer from the looming silhouette of the Walls, the buildings disappeared entirely. From there out there was nothing but flat, dusty wasteland, pockmarked with craters. Tommy made sure to stay far clear of them as he hiked, the base of the Walls getting closer and closer until suddenly he was there, hundreds of feet of thick, solid blackstone rock towering above him, stretching into the dusk further than he could see.

They were a remnant of times before, built just a year after the Flash when the city was still Lmanburg, but even now, thirty two years later, they were almost sacred. Respected by all in the city regardless of class.

No matter how out of touch with reality the people in the Lights were, even they understood they would all be dead without the Walls there, shielding them from the horrors of the other side. It was impossible to forget with them towering above the city.

A hand reached out to skim the blackstone. It was the first time he'd gotten this close. Not many dared to--even if they were dumb enough not to be scared off by the creatures that sometimes made it over from the other side, the constant guard patrols usually did the trick.

Schlatt may have been an arrogant, obstinate asshole with no clue how to run a city, but even he knew that having guards patrolling the Walls wasn't so much a question of convenience as one of survival.

He may not have given a damn about East Side or the Underground or keeping his citizens from starving on the streets, but he did care about power. And even Schlatt could realize that you couldn't exactly have power over a city if the city no longer existed. It was in his best interest to ensure guard surveillance was non-stop, each of them equipped with high tech rifles and only a kilometer stretch to patrol. Worse, the land bordering the Walls was flat and barren the entire way around the city--visibility couldn't possibly be higher.

It was unnecessary--the *things* the guards were looking for weren't exactly tiny. Even from the kilometer distance a guard would have to be dead or dumb not to spot one of them. Nothing was hidden here.

Which, he remembered suddenly, was why he needed to hurry.

He may have planned everything so he arrived during a guard change, but it wouldn't be long before the new guard showed up for his shift. He needed to be long gone by the time they made an appearance.

It really wouldn't be in his best interest to be caught, especially not now with all of the heat still on him from his first heist. He didn't know how it was possible the guards were still searching for Fundy's ring--it had been two weeks since he had stolen it, for Prime's sake. Any rational person would assume it had been sold or reforged or pawned off to Underground black markets by now, but not Fundy, apparently. It had been two long, grueling weeks of raiding and ransacking and increased guard presence spanning the entire city for a ring. A *ring*.

Fundy had even gone on a city-wide telecast, explaining the situation (though Tommy noted *he* wasn't mentioned in said explanation--it seemed Fundy didn't want the city to know he had been stolen from by a child), promising a reward of fifty thousand Primes for the ring's safe return. Which like, holy *shit*.

Tommy knew it was a trap, just Fundy trying to bait him out of hiding, but even *he* had been the slightest bit tempted by the offer. Fifty thousand? Who paid that for some ordinary ring? All these rich people really need to get a fucking grip.

Surprisingly, no one was searching for him from his close call at TechCorp. Which was...strangely lucky for him. Tommy had thought he was a goner for sure--TechCorp had certainly gotten footage of his face from the security cameras. He'd thought there would be even more fliers of his face plastered around the city on top of the ones that were already there from stealing the ring.

He had already begun mentally preparing himself to finally be thrown out by Skeppy.

But...nothing.

Tommy had obsessed over it for days after he made it back, convinced there was some massive conspiracy--that they had already placed a tracker in his clothes or he had been bugged and they were listening to every illicit conversation or they were marching to his room right that instant, only a few buildings from the bakery, soon to kick the door down and storm in with guns trained on his head.

It was only once he had stayed awake for an entire night, sitting completely, eerily still, staring at the door with his staff clenched in one hand that he realized he was acting insane and forced himself to relax.

Maybe TechCorp hadn't gotten as clear of a shot of his face as he had imagined. Maybe the microchip hadn't been as important as the gang thought it would be. Or, more likely, maybe the biggest weapons supplier in the entire known world didn't want the city to know they had been bested by a kid.

Whatever it was, he wasn't complaining, because it sort of looked like he had truly gotten away with it.

But looks could be deceiving. He didn't really want to get caught and find out for sure.

He shrugged his tool belt over his head, setting it softly on the ground so he could pull out his supplies.

He started with the new tool he had bought. It was a wicked little thing, lethally sharp, with a curved blade and a smooth wooden handle. The vendor who had sold it to him called the strange tool an "ice pick".

"An artifact from before the Flash," the man had insisted as he sold it to Tommy for a hundred Primes. Tommy took his word for it--there was never any ice in Manburg, so it wasn't like he knew any better, and the tool was sharp and sturdy. It was good enough for now.

Sam could have made something better. Something just for him. But Sam still refused to talk to him, so he would have to make do with the pick.

That seemed to be a common theme these days, the whole not talking to him thing. Not that he was bitter. He didn't care, really. He just couldn't help but notice Skeppy hadn't even looked at him in almost two weeks. Purpled was 'out winning life' as the closed sign on the front of his shop displayed, and even when he had managed to catch up to Quackity once the man had turned him away, "too busy" to spend even a moment talking with him.

Which, like, whatever. He didn't need them anyways. He had Wilbur to talk to. And Technoblade. Sort of. If talking about crime counted.

He pulled a worn pair of fingerless leather gloves on before tying his hair back with a thin red ribbon. It wasn't quite long enough to be pulled into a ponytail, but it had been months since he had properly chopped the long ends off, so the ribbon kept the longer strands from hanging over his eyes like they normally did. He needed as much visibility as possible if he wanted to pull this off.

And then that was it. With the refastening of his tool belt around his waist he was ready.

Physically, at least. He was still working on mentally.

He laid his hands on the thick stone, feeling the unyielding chill of it seep into his skin. He looked up at the endless expanse of black.

And then, with one last deep, steeling breath, Tommy began to climb.

When Technoblade told him his next job was to climb the Walls, Tommy had told him he was insane.

“That’s impossible!” he had blurted, half-wondering if the whole thing was some sort of sick joke, “That’s a death wish. No one has tried that and lived, not *ever*.”

“That’s wrong.” Technoblade had responded, voice infuriatingly steady, “One person has. Someone I know.”

Tommy scowled. “Bullshit.”

“No.” the man responded firmly, and that was the end of that.

A few more weak protests from Tommy and a few more resolute orders from Technoblade and Tommy had no choice but to accept it. The man was too stubborn to back down and too intimidating to argue with, even for Tommy.

He was climbing the Walls.

Wilbur’s apology was starting to make a lot more sense.

“What do I even need to climb up there for? What could I possibly retrieve, some of the blackstone from way up there or, oh Prime, don’t tell me you want blood from one of those fucking creatures, I don’t care how many potions it could make, that’ll be a huge fucking no from me. I don’t have a death wish, thank you very much.”

“No, nothing like that.” Technoblade drawled slowly, “We’re not psychopaths, you know.”

The silence that followed was pointed.

Technoblade sighed. “Whatever. No, you won’t be draining mob blood. The whole objective part actually comes during the second part of the plan.”

Tommy gaped. “Second part of the plan? I don’t remember that being a part of the deal Blade--”

“Don’t call me that.” *Blade* growled.

“--what else could I possibly do for you hundreds of feet off the ground and praying to Prime that I’m not about to fall to my imminent, painful death?”

“Well,” Technoblade huffed, “Exactly how much do you know about the drones?”

A sickly, sinking feeling began to form in Tommy’s gut. “The ultra-lethal, ultra-violent patrol drones that travel at the speed of sound? *Those* drones?”

Technoblade grunted his affirmation. “But what do you *know* about them?”

The fuck was that supposed to mean? What was it with the Antarctic gang and vague-ass questions?

Tommy rolled his eyes. “That they’re ultra-lethal. And ultra-violent. And travel at the speed of sound. Did you not hear me?”

“Yes, Theseus,” Technoblade sighed, clearly exasperated, “but what do you know about their *behavior*? You haven’t noticed the routes, the algorithms, *nothing*?”

The condescension in his voice was obvious, and it only pissed Tommy off more. What, did this guy think he was *better* than him or something? Because he wasn't. Tommy was the biggest man in the entire fucking city, and that was a fact. Him not noticing some fucking drone routes was literally nothing.

"The only *behavior* I fucking need to know is they'll fuckin' murder me on sight. If I see one of them I don't stay around watching it for *behavior*, dickhead. I run the other way. Not everyone has the luxury of just sitting on their ass and *watching* the drones like you, bitch. Don't fuckin' talk down to me. I--I spend my days doing shit. Important shit."

A long, disappointed silence.

Technoblade sighed. "I take back everything I said before. You're an idiot."

"Fuck you." Tommy snarled.

Technoblade continued unphased. "The bots have patterns. Each of them follows a path each day, every day. They all go through their own route, all of them separated into a seemingly random storm of bots, but if you're smart enough--" Tommy scowled "--you would notice that the drones are almost never seen at night. And if you noticed that, then you would notice that at the end of every day they all sync up and head in one specific direction, towards the outside of the city, for somewhere to spend the night. Like a nest. And each group of drones has an assigned nest they return to each night, with hundreds of them surrounding the city, somewhere that no one would ever think to look."

That was...surprisingly useful. And strange. Because how, exactly, was this information relevant?

Suddenly the anger was gone, replaced with the same sinking uncertainty as before. He wasn't sure he was going to like where this conversation was heading.

"...okay?" he said, but it came out as more of a question. He still wasn't quite getting it

Technoblade sighed again, clearly impatient. "The Walls, Theseus. Every single hive is nestled hundreds of feet up, within the Walls."

Some of that same condescension as earlier crept into his tone, but Tommy couldn't find it in himself to care. He was too concerned with the implications of the Blade's words.

"And...you're telling me this...why?" he asked uncertainly.

Deep down, he knew. He knew what Technoblade was telling him he needed to do.

He just didn't want to believe it.

"Because," Technoblade huffed, "You're going to find a nest with drones inside. And then you're going to dissect one."

If Tommy had thought Technoblade was insane before, him explaining the second part of the plan certainly didn't help. *Dissect a killer drone on a precarious ledge hundreds of feet above the ground while surrounded by other dormant killer drones for a single mechanical part* wasn't exactly the talk of someone with a great grip on reality.

But Technoblade had insisted that *No, I am not 'shitting you' Theseus. This is the plan*, and Tommy didn't really have any better options, did he? Not if he wanted to have enough Primes by the time Dream showed his face again. So, after a few more half-hearted complaints, Tommy gave in.

When Wilbur had found out during their call the next night he had scowled, like he thought Tommy had other options than accepting.

Tommy spent the next days preparing: buying climbing gear from the few vendors around the city who offered it, climbing up to his roof with a spyglass and searching the Walls for one of the so-called nests, and then, on the fourth day after their call, running halfway across the city to pick up the emergency beacon Wilbur had given (forced on) him. It was surprisingly inconspicuous, a bright red button that fit into the palm of his hand. When he got back to East Side he tucked it away in a sewer grate a block away from his room. If there really was a tracker in the beacon he wasn't going to have it lead straight to him and the bakery.

Each night he was on his check-in call as usual, discussing the particulars of the job with Wilbur, who was unusually forthcoming with details. For the other jobs the man had barely revealed any information, frustratingly elusive, but now he was almost *too* talkative, spending hours on the call each night with Tommy. Tommy couldn't say he minded it too terribly. It wasn't like anyone else was responding to his messages anyway, and like he said, Wilbur was *interesting*. Sometimes the conversation drifted, everything from Wilbur's favorite colors (teal and pale yellow), to his weapon of choice (a simple handgun, specifically a revolver with a handle made of rich, polished wood), to the tiny, idyllic bookstore that he had discovered deep within the Underground, and Tommy constantly had to remind himself to keep quiet about his own life, that the gang, *Wilbur*, were not to be trusted. Some nights Technoblade joined in, lurking in the background of their call, interjecting blunt, dry comments that were usually to the point of mocking Tommy.

Tommy found those nights to be significantly less enjoyable.

And then, a week and a half later he was finally ready. Or at least as ready as he would ever be. Wilbur sent him off that night with one of his rare smiles, something just a little sad in his eyes. They had spent almost four hours poring over the plan, ensuring Tommy knew exactly what he needed to do, absent of their usual petty bickering. Even Technoblade had joined the call for a brief moment to huff out a very reluctant, very aggressive *good luck, Theseus* that Wilbur had almost certainly forced him to say.

Tommy didn't like it. It felt too pitying, like they were only being even remotely nice because they were sure he would soon be dead.

And despite all of Wilbur's gentle reassurances, despite the carefully constructed plan, Tommy wasn't an idiot. The odds of him making it to their next call were virtually nonexistent. So, to be fair, they weren't exactly wrong.

Now, clinging to the Walls with burning, sweaty hands, three hundred feet off the ground, he wished he could go back and flip the both of those dumb motherfuckers off. And quit. And then flip them off again. Because no fucking plan could have prepared him for this.

It was windy. That was something he hadn't quite realized, that the wind would get exponentially harder to combat as he climbed, and he sure as hell was paying for it now. Even with the leather gloves to help with his grip his hands were sweaty, and although the Walls were far from smooth, they were unpredictable. Some areas had lots of nooks and crannies for him to get a grip on or balance his feet against, but other stretches could be virtually featureless, with almost no solid handholds. Holding on was a struggle, even more so because he now had to deal with his hair whipping around his face and falling into his eyes--because of course, his hair tie was long gone. It had blown away within the first hour of his climb.

His hands ached. His legs ached. *Everything* ached, really. That was oversight number two in this whole plan: climbing was, apparently, a whole-body sort of activity. Core and back and legs, and *especially* arms. Problem was, the only muscles Tommy regularly exercised were his legs. You know, for *running*. He had sort of assumed it would give him enough stamina to climb for a few hours.

Which was just so, so incredibly wrong. His body was made for dodging bullets and crawling through vents and general agility: he was skinny and lean and all around just not muscular at all, and he was very quickly realizing that was exactly the opposite sort of body needed for climbing.

Everything hurt. He could feel the exhaustion seeping into his bones. All he wanted was to go back to sleep.

No, that was an understatement. He wanted to die.

Problem number three: the ice pick. He understood why it was necessary. He really did. Safety and all that shit: the idea was, he lodged it into the rock every so often, and then it kept him from falling to his death by catching him by a rope, one end of which was tied around his waist and the other end to the pick, if he ever slipped or lost his grip. Which was great in theory.

In theory.

Because in practice this seemed like another thing that his body was entirely unprepared for. It took a lot of fucking effort to constantly lodge that thing into the thick rock and then wrench it out every time he wanted to move further up. It almost seemed like more work than it was worth. Part of him wanted to ditch it.

But then again. On one hand, possible death, on the other hand, carrying the extra two kilos of weight around. It would have been pretty dumb to give up his only real lifeline here. He didn't really feel like taking the quick way to the ground.

He reached up again and his hand landed on something wide and flat. He glanced up.

Prime have mercy, that was a ledge. A wide ledge, big enough for him to sit on.

Stars shone in Tommy's eyes. *Sitting*. It sounded like heaven.

Still, he hesitated. He was the tiniest bit worried that if he stopped, he wouldn't be able to get back up again. That his body would just straight up refuse to continue.

Exhaustion won out. He heaved himself up onto the ledge and collapsed into a boneless heap.

The city was strangely beautiful from up here, even the slums. He was only about three hundred feet up by his estimate, not nearly as high as the tops of the tallest skyscrapers yet, but even from this height you got a real sense of how small it all was. The buildings of the slums were just dots beneath him. The houses in the mid-ring looked like toys. Even the towers of the Lights looked startlingly attainable. Not quite as dazzling.

It was the lights that took his breath away. In the dim glow of dusk the golden shine of each one looked like a star painted against the deep blue sky.

Exhaustion tugged at his eyes.

It looked like a galaxy. Swirling, spiraling, shining. Beautiful.

Surely it wouldn't hurt him to rest for just a moment longer. To watch the lights.

His lashes fluttered.

Just a quick second, just for him to recover, and then he would continue on.

Just one more moment here...

His eyes fell shut and Tommy was lost to the stars.

The sky is pretty tonight.

It was his first thought as his eyes flickered, the mist of sleep receding slowly, gradually, until the full impact of the thought hit him. Tonight. *Tonight.*

His eyes shot open. The sky was pitch black. The only light was the glow of the city and the hazy half-moon above him.

Shit.

This was bad. Like, really bad. Everyone knew that night was when the creatures came out, when they scaled the outside of the Walls and then descended inside, hunting for human blood.

Tommy had never seen one himself, but he had heard the stories. They were monstrous.

They were why the people in the Bordertowns rarely left their dwellings, why no one dared to try and leave the city--nothing was waiting for them out there but the creatures and the barren wasteland left behind by the Flash. Schlatt may have been bad, but outside of the Walls would most definitely be worse.

Prime, the *things* out there were why the President of Lmanburg had ordered the Walls to be built in the first place. It was the entire reason they were so revered.

Because, despite the test of time, they had held strong. A trickle of the creatures may have made it into the city, but it was nothing compared to the ocean of them that waited beyond. The Walls were a dam, and the instant they fell the city would be flooded.

It would be a massacre. The creatures were ruthless, especially in the dark.

Which put Tommy in a bit of a tricky situation.

Running into one of the monsters was insanely unlikely--he'd have to be the unluckiest person in the world for it to ever happen. Which, knowing Tommy...

But he couldn't wait any longer. If he waited until morning he would definitely be late to the next check-in call, and although Wilbur had excused one tardy, he was sure he wouldn't be so kind about a second. He needed to go, and he needed to go *now*.

So he hoisted up his gear, and he turned back to the Walls, and he climbed.

And he climbed and climbed and climbed, until his legs were numb and his hands were one big bruise and there was nothing left except the expanse of black stone stretching on forever and ever, and he wondered if it was unending, if maybe he would just be climbing on and on for eternity.

But it wasn't as if he could back out now, so Tommy kept climbing.

The first hints of light were just appearing in the sky as he reached the nest. It was painfully obvious when he arrived, the aged, sturdy blackstone transitioning into dark metal framing a wide, open hole. From a distance it looked like a tiny cave in the blackstone, around three quarters of the way to the top of the Walls.

Clearly the manufacturers had assumed no one would be as crazy as to climb the nine hundred feet to reach the nest, because they hadn't bothered to fill in the footholds engraved into the metal, much to Tommy's relief.

With one last desperate burst of energy he climbed the rungs and pushed himself over the ledge, sprawling onto the solid, blessedly flat ground. He didn't move, not at first, just laid there gasping out shaky breaths.

After a minute or ten or thirty he caught his breath. He pushed himself to his feet and looked around.

...

Well, at least he knew he was in the right place.

The nest was only two dozen feet deep, but the drones covered every inch of the place, maybe fifty of them crammed in there total. They looked surprisingly unsuspecting when they were dormant. With all of their pincers and cameras and stabby weapons hidden away, they kind of just looked like shiny, gray rocks.

He pulled out a screwdriver from his tool belt. No time to waste. His nap had already put him incredibly far behind schedule.

Tommy took a step into the nest and everything *shifted*.

It was almost imperceptible, almost, but every single drone in the cave fucking *twitched*. They were supposed to be dormant, *Wilbur had said they would be dormant*, but they had just fucking *moved*.

But more importantly, Tommy could feel the *awareness*, prickling against his skin. Like the drones knew. Like they were just waiting for him to make a move.

He froze.

Oh fuck. Oh shit. The drones *knew*. Somehow, someway, they could feel him in the nest with them.

He was going to die. *He was going to die*. If there was a worst case scenario, this was it.

No, no, no, it was his imagination, surely. Wilbur wouldn't lie to him, he wouldn't. He was just tired. Follow the plan. He had to follow the plan. They were dormant. They couldn't detect him.

He took another step into the room. Nothing moved.

See? Just his imagination. Everything was fine.

He crouched next to the drone nearest to him, clenching his screwdriver in one fist.

Time to get to work.

His target, the part that the gang had sent him all this way to get, was the facial recognition camera housed in the 'head' of each drone. Each drone was, according to Technoblade, part of one massive hive mind, constantly communicating signals and alerts and other valuable information that the gang could use. Not to mention, the massive database of names and faces of the living citizens of the city that the drones used for their facial recognition software.

It would be an invaluable resource for people like them, and honestly something that Tommy might have been a little bit concerned about if he didn't know for sure that he wasn't in the database.

First he needed to take off a panel near the top of the machine, if he could just unscrew the tiny screws holding that together he would be good there--

The screwdriver touched the metal. Every drone rustled as one.

Tommy went dead still.

That time it was undeniable. The drones knew and he was fucked. Wilbur had lied.

He leaned back toward the drone, a little more frantically this time, twisting out the screws, snapping the panel open to reveal a mess of colorful wires, all of them attached to one small, circular part. That had to be

it.

He tugged at it, only to find it held tight by the web of wires. He pulled again, harder this time. The wires didn't give.

The drones were twitching continuously now, a mess of robotic, snappy movements and vibrations, clearly starting up, preparing to attack.

Fuck it. He stabbed his screwdriver into the mess of wires, and just started cutting the damned part out.

The drones very clearly didn't like that. They were rustling faster now. Tommy could hear their engines humming, their propellers starting up.

Just a little longer...

He felt the last wire snap under his screwdriver and he dug his hand into the back of the drone's head, searching desperately through the mess of wires.

The distinct snap of metal echoed throughout the room as the drones' pincers snapped into place.

Tommy's hand closed around cold metal.

"I got it!" he screeched, shoving himself back onto his feet, and that was the final straw.

The first drone sped towards him, a little unsteadily, and Tommy deflected it with an arm, frantically shoving the drone part into his tool belt, making sure it was secure. No way was he losing it now, after all this.

Another drone flew at his face, straight for his eyes, and he managed to throw up his arms to protect himself as it hit him, hard. He stumbled backwards, a step, two, just trying to catch his balance and prepare for the next onslaught, just to buy him enough time to figure out a plan as more drones hit him.

And he was almost doing it, shielding his body from the pincers and the blunt force, slowly steadying himself against the waves of bots--

His foot twisted beneath him. Tommy pitched sideways.

For one, horrible second, he thought he might be able to recover it. The other foot, the one not screaming in pain, frantically stumbled against the ground, trying to steady him, trying to find purchase against the smooth metal. And he thought he might do it. There'd been so many close calls already, this couldn't be the way he went, right?

And then his body tipped backwards.

Tommy remembered the guard from just days ago, the one he had killed. He wondered if this was what he felt, as he tilted over the edge.

Gravity took hold.

Tommy fell.

CHECKMATE BITCHES

CHECK THE WORD COUNT. CHECK IT. READ IT AND WEEP.

I HAVE ASCENDED TO GOD KING. IM UNSTOPPABLE.

anyways, check out my socials. you know how hard it was to write a chapter exactly 6992 words long?
it was hard. give me clout? JK JK JK DONT HATE ME

thank you as always for your wonderful comments and art and just for reading in the first place!! i hope
you enjoyed. be back with another chapter soon :))

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

LAST CHAPTER!!!

Tommy meets his bitter end

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Once, years earlier, Tommy had asked Sam what dying was like.

Predictably, Sam was more than a little concerned. He hadn't exactly prepared himself for a twelve year old to storm into his office and ask such a morbid question out of the blue, and he didn't take the surprise well. At first he had flat out refused to speak of it, instead questioning Tommy about why he was even asking such a question so suddenly, where it had all come from.

It had in fact come from Tommy's first close call as Theseus, a near miss with an arms dealer, a bullet whizzing just a little too close past his head for comfort.

Tommy didn't tell Sam that though. He just kept asking, day after day, until Sam relented, sitting Tommy down at his big mahogany desk and explaining everything with serious eyes.

It was a little different for everyone, he told Tommy, but most things were shared. Some people saw a bright light--Tommy had snorted, even *he* knew that one--some felt terribly cold, like their lifeforce was warmth seeping out from their body, some tended to cry, and almost all, Sam insisted, were calm. Accepting. Their life flashed before their eyes, warm and fleeting, and then they were gone.

At the time Tommy had taken it all in with wide, awe-filled eyes.

Now Tommy just thought Sam was an idiot. And a liar.

Because when would *Sam*, the quiet, steady mechanic two streets down have seen enough death to say such things so confidently?

Either way, he'd been dead wrong.

There were no flashes of his life, no warmth, no calm. There was just panic, desperation, and the cold, grim realization that he was going to die.

It was inescapable. What could he even do to stop it, nine hundred feet in the air, caught in the unrelenting grip of gravity?

Still, he couldn't help himself from trying, just one last time. As his combat boots left contact with the metal of the nest, just as he finally tipped backward over the edge, time warped and slowed and quieted around him.

Acting on raw instinct and adrenaline alone, he snatched the ice pick from his belt and flung out an arm toward the Walls. The pick could catch him, could bring his fall, and then this whole thing would be just another incident in a long line of close calls, and he would go back to his room and call Wilbur and tell him to go fuck himself.

So he stretched out his arm, praying for it to catch on something, *anything*.

The pick sliced through empty air.

He missed.

And then time snapped back into place and the nest was just a dot above him as he hurtled toward the ground and the last little spark of hope was extinguished.

So he screamed.

Dark and raw and throaty and terrified. His legs kicked, his arms flailed.

Maybe it was childish. Maybe it was pointless. But it was also *unfair*.

Who was he to have been dealt such a shitty hand? First his parents, then Dream, then the gangs and the stabbings and the heists, and now *this*?

It was unfair. So he screamed.

How much longer did he have left? How much time until his body slammed into the earth and every bone shattered? Five seconds? Ten?

Should he close his eyes? Open them? Would it be better to see the Walls rushing beside him, the top getting further and further away, or to spend his last few seconds not knowing, just waiting for it to end?

The wind roared in his ears. He closed his eyes.

Would--would it hurt? Or would it be over so instantly that his brain wouldn't even have the time to process the pain?

He wasn't sure he wanted to know. His head buzzed, white noise rushing through his mind.

This was really it, huh? It was hard to swallow. So much for going out with a bang. Unless--a half-sob half-laugh was lost to the empty air--unless you counted the sound of his impact, that was.

The buzzing got louder. Too loud.

That wasn't in his head.

Tommy opened his eyes.

Drones. He had forgotten about the drones.

They may have been asleep before, but they certainly weren't anymore. Dozens were in the air flying toward him, gaining on him at a rapid speed, pincers outstretched. And they were getting closer. They'd certainly reach him before he hit the ground.

Not that it mattered.

Whether it was the solid, unyielding ground or the razor sharp pincers of the drones, he was as good as dead.

Perhaps once the drones reached him they would carry his lifeless body back to the Walls for the guards to use as bait for the creatures. Or perhaps they would leave him to rot in the barren plains outside the Bordertowns. The buzz of propellers reached a peak.

An instant later and they were on him.

The drone at the head of the pack flew for his face, pincers outstretched and wickedly sharp, and Tommy suddenly decided, *no*, he would actually much rather hit the ground and face instant pulverization than be slowly, painfully torn limb from limb by the fucking bots.

His head bobbed to the side, dodging the pincer, and he swung out an arm to push the bot away.

The problem with fighting while speeding through the air at terminal fucking velocity was that it wasn't exactly a precise process. So instead of pushing the drone away, his hand latched onto the arm of the propeller, getting him even closer to the sleek metallic body. Worse, the drone twisted in the air to face him again, only twisting his arm further around the bot, pulling him on top of it.

Tommy struggled to dodge the sharp weapons of it at such a close proximity.

The drone was trying to level out now that it had caught its target, the propellers shifting to try and keep it from crashing into the ground, and it was...

Tommy sucked in a breath. A sudden, desperate idea began to take shape.

It was slowing his fall.

He could--*it was slowing his fall*.

The bot turned midair to face him, stabbing its pincer at his eyes, and Tommy shifted to dodge it with new energy.

His grip tightened on the ice pick, hefting it into the air. That just wouldn't do. A central part of his plan was him being alive to see it through. He brought the tool down.

The pick whacked against the left pincer, once, twice, until the sharp metal snapped off with a clang. The right arm fought to stab at his face again, the drone twisting underneath him for a better angle, and Tommy leaned out of its path.

He caught a glimpse of the ground beneath them. It was close. Too close.

It wouldn't be enough.

The bots propellers weren't meant for the weight of two. It was slowing his fall, but not by enough.

He needed a second drone.

He gave up on the pincers, letting the ice pick go, leaving it to fall to oblivion. He could dodge the pincers. He couldn't dodge gravity.

His eyes scanned the sky, searching for a target. The drones were all still trailing after him, chasing him down. The nearest one was only a meter away. Just out of his reach.

He chanced a glance down.

Fuck. Out of time.

He leaned out, stretching, *stretching*, his fingertips just inches from skimming the metal.

Just a little more...

His hand latched onto the second drone.

And then he hit the ground.

He woke up with a gasp that nearly sent him to tears. Stabbing, crippling pain echoed through his chest with every new breath he took. His head pounded with the beat of his heart.

Well. At least he wasn't dead.

Thankfully, he hadn't been knocked out for too long either. The sky was still dark above him.

He tried to push himself up on his left arm to survey the area and immediately collapsed back onto his back, releasing a short scream of pain as blinding, white hot agony raced up his arm. Stars flashed in his eyes.

He was trembling as he looked down at the damage. His vision swam in his head.

His left arm was the worst of it, at least visibly. It was bent in a way that was decidedly not normal, pulsing waves of pain through his body. Tommy was pretty sure he caught sight of the gooey white of bone poking through the skin before he forced himself to look away.

His right ankle was next, twisted just a little too wrong, pulled a little too sharply. Not remotely near as bad as his arm though. This, at least, was manageable.

And then there was everything else--the cuts and scrapes and chunks of missing flesh from the fall that had blood and pus and other mysterious liquids oozing out across every part of his body, painting him a gruesome rust-red.

Internally, he was sure he had messed other things up. His chest felt like it was full of knives. His head throbbed. When he reached up with his good arm to touch it, it came away warm and red.

Ouch.

From somewhere distant came an indecipherable yell. Tommy lifted his head off the ground and stared out at the wasteland at the base of the Walls.

The guards hadn't seen him when he climbed the Wall--half because he was wearing dark clothes against a dark wall in the dim light of dusk and half because of a stroke of pure luck-- but they had certainly seen him now. The beams of their flashlights were moving closer, sweeping in his direction, their distant shouts filtering through the air.

When he finally managed to sit up and look around with better visibility it became much more apparent as to *why*.

Thick, dark pillars of smoke drifted up into the air around him. Dozens of piles of demolished silver metal littered the ground around him.

The drones. They must not have been able to pull up in time, too locked in on their target to notice the rapidly approaching ground.

And now their crushed, twisted scraps, crumpled almost beyond recognition, were a beacon of smoke leading the guards straight to him.

He needed to go.

He propped himself up on his good arm, staggering to his feet. His ankle--his expression pinched--his ankle was not doing too good. Not quite as manageable as he thought.

But compared to what the guards would do to him it was nothing, and he had just survived a nine hundred foot fall. He could handle some pain.

Holy shit, that still hadn't quite sunk in yet. He had survived. His foot was pulsing waves of pain and his chest felt like it was filled with shards of glass and his arm definitely wasn't supposed to be twisted that way, but he was alive. Somehow. He sure as hell wasn't going to lose it all now to a few more guards.

So he stumbled toward the shadow of the Bordertowns looming in the distance.

The drones were locked onto him. He could hear them in the background of every footstep, that ever-present buzzing getting louder and louder each second.

The guards had spotted him too, he knew. Right as he had disappeared into the maze-like streets of the Bordertowns their distant shouts had crescendoed, their faint flashlight beams landing on him. The bots were just much better at hunting. Much more efficient at tracking him as he twisted and turned through the labyrinth of streets. The guards were there, just farther back.

Case in point: they were getting closer and Tommy's stamina was running low. Hobbling through the streets in constant agony, unable to take a full breath, his vision blurry and mind foggy, was a lot harder than it sounded.

The buzzing was louder, maybe only a few hundred meters away, when he finally had to stop.

He leaned over himself, his good hand on his knee as he tried to catch his breath without actually expanding his lungs.

Fuck, this sucked. Everything was agony. He wasn't sure he could pull off another miraculous escape, not today. Not like this.

The silhouette of the first drone became visible on the horizon. Tommy paled

Maybe he *was* screwed.

"Psst." A voice hissed at him from somewhere to his side, and Tommy whipped his head toward the sound frantically. This was still the Bordertowns after all. There was more to worry about than the guards, especially with his foot and his chest and his head and his *arm*.

But all he saw was a rustled, poofy head of brown hair and two feral eyes, peeking out from the shadows of a nearby alleyway.

Tommy eyed the stranger warily.

"The fuck? Stay away from me." he snapped. The stranger decided to take it as an invitation. They stepped into the light.

Tommy frowned. Another kid, just like him, just like Ranboo. With too tired eyes and a rabid grin and muted brown clothes that were more like rags. He gestured for Tommy to follow him down the alleyway, and, out of options, Tommy did.

Something about the boy set Tommy at ease almost instantly--maybe the way the boy was risking his neck for him or how he was short enough that Tommy thought he could probably take him down if he tried to kill him, even with one bad arm. Or maybe it was, you know, just the head wound talking.

The kid led him down the alley, stopping them at the side door to a rickety wooden hut. He entered it, leaving Tommy out in the street all alone and haunted by the too-close buzz of the drones, wondering if maybe the kid had just changed his mind and left him for dead.

But no, a minute later the kid reemerged gripping a tiny handheld device that looked to be held together solely by a little bit of string and a lot of hope. The only component he could identify on the little electronic was two tiny signal antenna, pointing out of the top.

The kid fiddled with the machinery, not even giving Tommy a second glance. Tommy wondered if he had forgotten he existed.

“The bees are here.”

Tommy startled at his voice, raspy from disuse, before the words registered and he turned to look at the boy, confused.

“My bees.” the boy said again, turning to meet his gaze, eyes wild, “Can’t you hear them buzz?”

What...what the fuck? There were no bees in Manburg. There hadn't been any since the Flash. And nothing buzzed around here, nothing except...

It hit him. “The drones??”

The boy hummed his approval, focused solely on fiddling with the tiny electronic device.

Tommy eyed the skies uneasily. “I--I don’t think this will work, dude, no one can outrun those...”

The kid glanced at him sharply. “Shhhh.”

Tommy shut up. This kid was definitely fucking insane, but he seemed confident, and it wasn't like Tommy had a lot of other options.

The buzzing reached that same, overwhelming crescendo again. Tommy spotted a drone and then two and then a dozen at the end of their little alley, already turning their way, speeding toward them. He took a step back.

Tommy glanced over at the kid, who looked lost in his little device, totally unaffected, and then back up to the drones, only a few dozen meters away, and then back to the kid.

He didn't seem to mind the killer robots at all.

Tommy was very quickly realizing that trusting the insane kid who had waved at him from a dark alleyway had been a bad idea. "Bee Kid, they're fucking here--"

The kid glared at him and flipped a switch on the device.

The buzzing stopped.

Tommy watched as, one by one, the drones paused in midair, twitched, and then fell to the ground in tiny, smoking piles.

A moment later and not a single one was left.

Tommy's eyes swung over to the boy next to him, who was looking extremely smug about the whole thing.

He gaped. “You...you just...”

The kid grinned at him happily. “Fried. No more buzzing. No more anything. Data all gone. Hardware is burnt. The bees are dead.”

The world spun. Tommy touched a hand to his head wearily, closing his eyes. He...he needed to fucking sit down or something.

“Am I..? My head, this is fuckin...” he took a deep breath, opened his eyes to meet the kid's gaze, “You’re *real*, right?”

The boy cocked his head. Rough shouts sounded in the distance.

“Go,” the boy grabbed at his shoulder, hissing at him suddenly, “They’re close.”

Tommy glanced over his shoulder. The alleyway was still clear.

He felt like he needed to offer something in return, some way to pay back the debt, even if he was in no shape to do so.

He turned back to face the kid. “Y-you don’t need help, somewhere to--”

No one was there. The boy was gone.

Tommy ran.

More twists and turns, limping down streets, glancing over his shoulders, listening for the yells of the guards, trying desperately to ignore the pain in his arm and chest and foot and the haze that wouldn't seem to lift from his head.

After what felt like hours, he slowed.

He glanced back over his shoulder as he turned another corner, scanning the alleyway for guards. It was blessedly empty.

Holy shit, he had made it--he had fallen off the Wall and been chased by drones and almost caught by the guards, but he had fucking made it. He couldn't hear the bark of their shouts, the stomp of their boots. The coast was clear.

He looked back up at the street.

He was looking at a guard. And, a dozen yards away, the guard looked back at him.

Time seemed to slow. Tommy couldn't move.

Thunder tore through the air. His knee wobbled.

And then everything else registered and blinding, earth-shattering pain tore through his stomach.

For the second time that day, Tommy fell.

He stayed down. As the guard's boots thudded closer and closer, as a pool of something warm and sticky spread under his stomach, as a steel-toed boot kicked against his side with a grunt, he didn't move. It wasn't even really a conscious decision. He just...couldn't. Something in his brain just couldn't get him to move, even with the dirt in his face and the puddle forming around him.

Dimly, faintly, he wondered if he was going into shock. Even the worst of his injuries were just dull pains now. Numb. Some part of him knew that he should probably be concerned about that, but it was a small part, distant. He stayed down.

And then, minutes or seconds or hours later, the fog receded just a little. Just enough for him to realize he had been shot. Just enough for him to realize he was dying.

Something about *that* didn't sit quite right.

He crawled to his feet in a daze, stumbling down the streets half-conscious. He wasn't present enough to process it, that he was even moving, that he was turning down different streets and alleyways and going toward his room, but his feet led him of their own accord, from years of instinct and experience.

When the sentient part of mind next resurfaced he was standing in front of the door to his room. He wasn't even sure how he had managed to get up the ladder on the side of the building with only one good arm and one good leg and blood pouring down his stomach, but he was there.

He was barely able to open the door. Smears of blood stained into the metal. It clanged shut behind him, and the sound seemed too loud, distorted.

He hobbled over to his chair and sank into it, and just as suddenly as it had come, the rush of adrenaline faded. Exhaustion, deep and bleak and endless, washed over him and with it came the pain. Sharp and stabbing and suffocating, and despite the way his entire body seemed to quake with every inhale, despite the sharp pains every time he moved his arm, despite the too-hot, pulsing feeling around his stomach, all Tommy really wanted to do was sleep.

He wouldn't wake up. He was still sentient enough to realize that. As soon as he relented to the tide of unconsciousness, he would bleed himself dry, all by himself in this little tiny room.

All alone until the end.

He tried to fight against it at first, tried to escape the deep tiredness settling in his bones. But what was the point? It's not like he was going to be able to get help.

Sam wouldn't even open the door for him on a normal day, much less with a bullet still lodged in his stomach. Quackity probably wouldn't be there, even if he was able to make the mile-long hike to his casino, and he'd much rather die in the comfort of his own room than cause him the inconvenience of cleaning his body off the floor. Skeppy would probably call the guards for him and end the issue there and then. Purpled- -they didn't have that kind of relationship. They were business associates at best. He was not someone willing to deal with a dying kid, and that was if he was even back at the shop.

There was no helping him, was there? No last hope. Even he couldn't outwit a bullet wound and rapid blood loss.

So resistance was futile. All there was left to do was wait, maybe make a futile attempt at patching himself up, try to get comfortable.

He shifted in the desk chair ever so slightly and it sent bolts of agony up his chest.

Maybe not then. Maybe he'd just stay like this.

His good hand drifted down to rest on his tool belt. It landed on a lump in the fabric. Tommy opened the pouch mindlessly.

Oh. Right. The part. The device he'd lost his life for.

It was ruined now, dented on one side, coated with a thin, wet layer of blood. For some reason the discovery just made everything worse.

Wilbur. He'd be so disappointed. So angry. At him. He'd think Tommy had ghosted him or gotten caught by the guards and he would never get all of the parts he'd paid Tommy for.

The thought stuck in his mind. All the weeks they had spent together, all the Primes he had paid Tommy, and he'd have nothing to show for it.

Well. Now was the time to tie up all his loose ends, wasn't it? No harm in telling him he had failed now, was there?

He had to call, because after everything, even though Wilbur was still a total dick, Tommy sort of owed it to him.

And maybe, just maybe, because Tommy didn't want to be alone. Just...not now.

So, with shaking hands, he opened up his laptop and clicked on his messages with Wilbur. His mouse hovered over the *Join Call* button. Blood dripped from his hands onto the computer, rolling down the screen.

He clicked.

The call rang and kept ringing, and for a moment Tommy was afraid that Wilbur wouldn't answer. He'd bleed out alone and no one would ever know.

And then the call dinged. Wilbur's face appeared, his glasses crooked, his hair disheveled. His usual trench coat had been replaced by something that looked awfully like a sweatshirt. His expression--well, that was actually the same as usual. He was mad.

"Fucking hell, Theseus it is 0700 in the morning, you better have a good fucking reason for this." Where was he even supposed to start? What could he even say?

He waited for too long to respond and Wilbur scowled. "Theseus. Stop wasting my time, *what do you want?*"

"Wil--Wilbur?" Tommy whispered and his voice broke, "I--'m really sorry."

Wilbur went suddenly, deathly still. "Theseus? Your--your voice, it sounds..."

Somewhere, distantly, Tommy realized that he had forgotten his voice modulator. He didn't bother turning it on. His identity wouldn't matter much once he was dead.

"Wil--I, I'm sorry, your parts, I can't..." a stab of pain shot through his body and he gasped a breath, "It's all wet now, I don't think...and with all the...fuck, Wilbur, there's so much blood, I don't think I'm gonna be--"

Wilbur's expression, which had been getting more and more concerned as Tommy kept speaking, flashed to alarm. "*Blood?* What do you mean, blood?! Are you...Theseus, are you hurt?"

"Mhm. Sorry. I'll j'st go." he mumbled sleepily. He had done what he needed to do, after all. He'd told Wilbur about the parts. His mouse hovered above the button to end the call.

"No! No. Fuck, stay on the line Theseus." Wilbur snapped, running his hands through his hair, over and over again, "Do you have your emergency beacon? Where is it?"

Something sharp and desperate laced his tone, something Tommy couldn't quite place.

He blinked slowly. "Not 'ere. Stashed it. Block. Too far."

"Shit!" Wilbur shouted sharply, lowering his head into his hands, "Okay. Theseus, it's okay, I can handle this."

Another stab of pain hit his side and it almost sent him tumbling off the chair with a sharp breath of air. "W-Wilbur, I can't--Prime, Will. I have to, I'm sorry, I--*bye*."

Wilbur's eyes snapped back to the camera, suddenly intense, fervent. "Theseus, don't you fucking dare, you stay in this call--"

The call went dark. Tommy's hand trembled as it lifted softly from the trackpad.

Wilbur was gone now. That--Tommy would've laughed if he didn't know it would be excruciating--that was probably the last time he'd ever see him, wasn't it?

Another intense pulse of pain shot up from his stomach and Tommy remembered that *oh yeah he had a hole in his body*.

He hadn't--he hadn't even seen the extent of the damage yet, has he?

Maybe, *maybe*, his mind hoped desperately, it felt worse than it actually was. Maybe it was just a tiny little flesh wound.

He reached down slowly, shakily, with his good arm and lifted up his dark, damp shirt. He froze.

Prime. Dear *Prime*.

It was most definitely not just a flesh wound.

There--there was so much blood. It covered his room, his body, his hands. He had never seen quite so much so close in one place. He lifted a hand into the light mindlessly, watching as the deep, thick red dripped off his hand--

No. *No*. That was his head, that was the haze again. Focus. He could do first aid. He had done it before.

Never for a wound like this.

No. Focus. *Focus*. What--what was the first step again? Cleaning or stitching or--the bullet hadn't gone out the other side, wasn't that first? Or was it steridi--sterilizing? No, no it was the bullet, he had to get it out first, surely.

Tweezers. Did he have a pair? He didn't think so. Fingers then. He had to use his fingers.

Or--hadn't Sam told him that was unsanitary? Something about infection? No, that had been something else. Something else.

The bullet. He had to get it out.

He forced himself to look back down at the pool of red coating his stomach, forced his hands to hover above it.

They were trembling so badly it took him three tries to find the bullet wound. But then they touched it and they pushed inside and--

His entire body convulsed.

Prime. Fuck. *Bitch*.

He couldn't--no he *had* to get the bullet out. He had...he needed...no back *off* stupid shadows, stop creeping around his vision.

Okay. Okay. He could do this.

His fingers inched deeper, just a little bit deeper, just a little farther--

Blinding, white hot pain shot through him.

His body was on fire, being suffocated alive, tearing at the seams, and above it all, above the sharp, staggering pain, Tommy was once again hit with just how *wrong* Sam had been.

And then the shadows raced to meet him and Tommy didn't think anything at all.

Chapter End Notes

YOUVE JUST BEEN PRANKED HAHAAHAAAA!!

sorry not sorry to anyone who read the chapter summary. no, this is not the last chapter. i just take joy in your suffering.

anyway, how's everyone feeling? the comments from last chapter seemed, uh, a little tinyyyy bit upset with me. im not sure they'll be too much better after this one lol

next chapter probably wont be out as quickly as this--i want to make sure it's absolutely perfect. i set the tentative date for around next sunday.

thank you again for your wonderful comments and for reading and especially to all the people who have made art for this fic (especially to everyone in the discord, love you guys)! it makes me so totally happy and it all looks legit super epic! i'm probably going to do a fan art showcase in our next recap chapter, just so i can make sure it is fully appreciated.

see you all soon :))

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Tommy is found.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Someone was pounding on his door. That was what finally pulled him out of his slumber.

It was hazy at first. Everything was still muffled and he was surrounded by darkness and he thought he was dead. It was the only thing that made sense. He had bled out. This was the afterlife.

In the next instant the fog of unconsciousness lifted. The pain returned in one fell swoop. Tommy sucked in a shaky breath.

Nope. Definitely still alive.

And someone was pounding on his door.

Someone was pounding on his door.

Guards. They had found him.

Bad would announce himself, Skeppy would demand to be let in. There was no one else.

It was the guards.

Fuck.

Tommy leaned toward his desk, ignoring the sharp pain the movement caused.

He wouldn't let them take him. If he was dying he would die right fucking there in his own room, not at their mercy.

He grabbed his nail gun from the desk. He had been working on crafting it in his spare time, what little of it existed, determined to learn how to make his own weapons without Sam's handouts. It wasn't a very good gun, to be honest, little more than scraps cobbled together so he could load bits of scavenged metal into one end, compress the air, and shoot them out the other fast enough to pierce skin.

In theory. He hadn't really had a chance to properly test it out yet.

But it would have to be enough. He hadn't had time to make any more weapons and he certainly wasn't going down without a fight.

The door slammed open on its hinges. Someone had kicked it in. Tommy lifted the weapon toward the noise with his one good arm. The gun shook in his hand.

A figure stepped into the room. Tall, broad, imposing.

Tommy didn't think. He just fired.

And missed. The nail landed a foot right of the intruder's eye, embedding itself into the drywall. The man turned to face him.

Tommy swallowed. Shit.

The first thing he noticed was the hair. Not really his first priority, he knew, but it was hard not to notice it, alright? Not when it was nearly waist long and bright fucking pink.

Not exactly what he had expected from someone there to kill him.

The outfit was what he spotted next.

He was wearing boots. Not the sturdy, tough leather boots that Tommy used to get around, but finer, polished, lace-up boots that went to his shins. Dark, silky dress pants, a white button up tunic, and, oh yeah, a fucking cape--this guy was *not* dressed for field work. Not in the slightest.

Like, a cape? How was that going to work in a fight? Tommy's little hood was thin and dark and practical, made to be light and stealthy. The intruder's cape was thick and heavy and blood red. Surely it would only obstruct swings of his weapon and slow him down and get caught on objects at the most inconvenient of times.

Even half-dead and delirious from blood loss, Tommy was sane enough to realize it was a shit idea. Which certainly said something about the new guy: not exactly the brightest bulb.

And that *mask*. How could he even see through that thing? It looked like half of a boar's skull, cut off to show his sharp jaw and mouth. Holes were cut around his eyes, but *still*. That *had* to fuck with his peripheral vision.

He must have been a new assassin or something. The fresh ones always tended to have a flair for the dramatic.

The edges of the man's lips tipped downward. He shifted on his feet.

Tommy realized suddenly that they had just been staring at each other, the man with some unidentifiable emotion hidden under the mask, him in desperate anger and distaste. He'd gotten so caught up with slamming the man's poor taste in murder clothes that he'd gotten distracted. Or maybe it had just been the head wound again. The gun started to droop in his hand.

He hefted it back up to aim at the man's throat. He wouldn't make it that easy.

He met the man's blood-red eyes through the mask and gave his best scowl.

"Another step and the next one goes through your throat." he snarled, though it came out wobbly and slurred and not nearly as intimidating as he had hoped.

The man startled a little at the words but remained otherwise unaffected, still staring at Tommy. He didn't look quite as scared witless as Tommy had thought, but that sort of made sense considering he looked like he could *take* a nail to the throat without faltering. What was stranger, though, was that he didn't make a move toward him.

For someone trying to kill him the stranger was unusually slow to the take. Their exchange so far couldn't have lasted more than thirty seconds, but still, most assassins would've taken their shot by now. This guy was just sort of looking at him.

But then again, maybe that was because he had the advantage of height and stature and just general health. Tommy was barely clinging to life; it wasn't like the man needed to worry about him getting away. He really had all the time in the world.

And he seemed intent on taking it. He was surveying the room now, eyes darting over the little pile of blankets he called a bed, his shitty, blood-smeared computer, the bookshelf of trinkets and clothes and food. They lingered on the torn Lmanburg flag, still hanging on his wall, and Tommy winced. Probably wasn't his brightest moment to leave up the illegal flag of the government's most hated former enemy, especially in front of someone who was probably hired by said government to kill him.

Or maybe this guy was just an assassin from one of his *other* enemies, and it was just a lucky coincidence that he happened to show up *now*.

The man's gaze finally circled back to him and, *oh, yep, here we go*, he finally took a step towards Tommy. Tommy's finger twitched on the trigger.

Except no, because now the guy was stopping *again*. Like, come *on*, dude. He couldn't possibly be scared of the pathetic little nail gun, couldn't he just get it over with? At this rate, Tommy would be dead before he was even dead.

No wait. That didn't make sense. What was the fucking word? Dead before he was even...What? Fuck.

The man cleared his throat and Tommy's eyes snapped to his. He had been staring off into space again. He really needed to try to stop doing that. If only his brain didn't feel so jumbled.

"Are you..." the man started, and Tommy flinched at his voice, gruff and vaguely familiar, like he had heard it once in a dream, "Theseus?"

Shit. Even with his brain all weird he knew that was not good. Deny.

"No!" he blurted. He couldn't know. Nobody could know. Not when there was Bad and Skeppy, a floor below him, not when there were classified Underground documents on his laptop and in his room, not when he hadn't cleaned the room of everything that could expose sensitive info on the Underground's dealings. Had he even logged out of his account on his laptop? What if they found the Underground's messaging system?

The man stiffened, his frown deepening, and Tommy belatedly realized his mistake.

"I mean, Theseus? Who the fuck is Theseus? Nobody like that 'round here." he slurred.

The man was very obviously unconvinced.

His red eyes bored into Tommy. They trailed from his eyes to his head to his fucked up arm and then over to his other hand, trembling violently as it tried to keep holding up the nail gun.

Tommy wasn't positive, but he thought the man might've gone just a little pale.

From somewhere outside the room came the sound of footsteps on the roof and Tommy's grip on the gun tightened. Was this guy just an assassin-in-training then? And his mentor was outside, waiting to finish Tommy off?

"Is this it?" Another vaguely familiar voice called from outside, and the masked man tensed even further, red eyes glancing between Tommy and the open door like he was having some sort of dilemma. He didn't answer.

The newcomer sighed irritably. "I'm coming in."

And the masked man made his decision. He twirled sharply on one heel, cape fluttering through the air behind him, and stepped toward the door, broad shoulders filling the entire frame. His head tilted down, looking at someone outside the room, just out of Tommy's view.

“You won’t want to see this.” he huffed, blunt and grave, and Tommy was once again hit with the *familiarity* of it. He knew the voice, he was sure of it, but from *where*...
But again. Head injury. Blood loss. Maybe he didn’t.

“Is it him?” the new voice asked sharply. The masked man hesitated.

And then he nodded.

That couldn’t be good.

A pale hand appeared on the masked man’s arm, and he sighed, shaking his head.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” he grumbled as he stepped out of the way to lean against the open door.

The newcomer huffed angrily and stepped into the room, glancing briefly at his surroundings before he turned and locked eyes with Tommy.

The new man froze. His mouth fell open.

A second later it hit Tommy.

He knew those eyes. He knew that face. He knew that dumb, ratty trenchcoat.

That was Wilbur.

He was taller in person.

It was dumb to be caught on that--of *course* he seemed taller now than when Tommy could only see the top half of him through a tiny, flickering screen--but it was what Tommy’s brain seemed to have the most trouble figuring out. Wilbur had legs. Wilbur had knees and shoes and *feet*. He was *tall*.

Tommy’s head hurt.

There were other differences too, smaller things that hadn’t quite shown up through the camera--the faint scar on his right cheek, the way his nose was just a little bit crooked, how his cheekbones weren’t quite as sharp and pretentious as they had been over the screen. And even the parts of him without any obvious differences felt *off*, jut a little distorted from what he was used to. Online Wilbur and Here Wilbur clashed in his mind. His brain struggled to connect the two images, the two versions of him, to blur the lines and make them into one.

But even with everything, he was still unmistakable. He still had that curly mop of hair and his silky black pants and a pressed white dress shirt and that dumb trenchcoat. He was still Wilbur.

Wilbur. Wilbur who was *there*. In his room. Staring at him.

Fuck.

This was bad. This was so bad. How--how had they even found him?? He had hidden the emergency beacon a block and a half away. Hundreds, *hundreds*, of dwellings stretched between here and there. What the--how--what did--

How was he there???

And, more importantly, *why*?

Because he wasn't there to help, that was for sure. Their relationship was strictly business, a thief and his client, employer and employee, hell, if anything it was worse than that--they *despised* each other. Wilbur wouldn't exactly take issue with his death, in fact, given what Tommy had learned about the nature of how he'd been employed by the gang, he wouldn't be surprised if Wilbur *enjoyed* it.

But maybe that was why he had shown up instead. Maybe Wilbur hated him so much that he and some lackey had made a personal house call just to ensure that Tommy was well and truly dead.

Tommy ignored the way the thought stung.

He wouldn't go down easy just because he'd gotten slightly, nonsensically attached to the man like an idiot. It would be harder to fight Wilbur than some random, dramatic-as-fuck assassin, but it wouldn't stop him from defending himself. If Wilbur was going to kill him, Tommy was making damn well sure he hurt for it.

Except Wilbur wasn't moving *either*. He was just standing there on the other side of the room, watching him with wide eyes, just like the masked man had done. Just like he was *still* doing, right over Wilbur's shoulder.

What the fuck, why were they just *looking* at him? Did they forget how their knives worked or something? Or did they just enjoy watching him slowly bleed dry? They had to do something eventually, right?

Wilbur's eyes weren't even meeting his gaze anymore, rapidly flickering between the injuries on his body, narrowing as they reached his arm before drifting back up to his face and then repeating the process all over again.

He looked lost. Tommy wasn't sure why that was the word that came to mind, but it fit. He looked lost.

He sort of wished they would just get it over with. It had been what, three minutes since they had shown up at his door? His arm was beginning to ache from keeping the nail gun held up, and he had a light, airy feeling in his head that made him think he was going to pass out soon. It'd be great if they could just hurry the whole murder thing along.

Another second ticked away. They didn't move.

Fine. If they weren't going to do it, he would.

"I'll shoot," he croaked, barely even intelligible with how much he slurred the words, and Wilbur's eyes shot back up to his face.

Tommy tried not to shrink at the gaze, tried to hold his head high despite the stabs of pain the movement sent through him, "I--I'll shoot. I'll do it. Back off."

A sharp inhale. Wilbur cracked his knuckles. The man behind him shifted on his feet. Wilbur turned to glance at him.

"Call Phil. Tell him we found him." A pause. "Do it outside."

The masked man glanced once between Tommy and Wilbur, his mouth twisting into a frown.

"Wil--" he started, and Wilbur's gaze went sharp.

The man sighed, resigned. He swept out of the room without another word, his cape whooshing behind him.

And then it was just them.

Him and Wilbur. Alone.

The moment the masked man left the room Wilbur moved to step towards him and the nail gun shot back up to point at his throat.

Tommy had unconsciously let it relax again, trying to stave off the muscle cramp that had begun to form in his arm, but no more. Not when Wilbur was looking at him like that, like he was finally going to approach.

Wilbur froze, eyeing the weapon.

A second later, his gaze shot back to Tommy.

"Theseus?" he breathed.

Tommy shook his head, rapidly, desperately, hoping that Wilbur would look at him, really *look* at the bleeding kid and the scrappy room, and realize there was no way he was Theseus and just leave him to die in peace. Or put him out of his misery. He didn't care which. He just couldn't stand any more of this awkward in between, the waiting.

"No." he whispered and he saw Wilbur's eyes widen, his mouth twist, his brows furrow. Some unknown emotion filled his gaze.

He didn't believe him. If his expression didn't clue Tommy in it would have been clear as day the moment Wilbur began to walk towards him, completely ignoring the nail gun pointed at his neck.

Well, Tommy would show him. You didn't underestimate Tommy fucking Innett. He pulled the trigger.

And missed. Again. *Really?*

He scowled and threw the gun back on his desk, turning back to face Wilbur and startling back when he realized the man was right in front of him. Towering above his slumped form like a giant. He must have crossed the room in three long steps in the brief moment Tommy had looked away. There went any advantage he might have had.

Prime, he wished they had never shown up. A few more minutes and he could have just died in his sleep, peaceful and oblivious and painlessly. Not anymore.

Wilbur had always been petty. He'd make it hurt.

There was no getting away from him, no convincing him to go, not unless...

Tommy froze. His eyes went wide.

Unless...maybe Wilbur hadn't realized he was dying. Tommy was slumped, hunched over in a way that covered most of his stomach, an arm thrown over the bullet hole from when he had made a feeble attempt to put pressure on the wound; Wilbur hadn't quite yet spotted the ever-growing pool of blood on his stomach. He had seen the arm, the blood dripping from his head, he knew Tommy was weak enough to safely approach, but he hadn't seen the fatal blow.

It all clicked together. Tommy began plotting a last, desperate plan.

Maybe, just maybe, he could convince Wilbur to let him die in peace.

He just had to play his cards right.

Abruptly, he looked up and met Wilbur's eyes. "You know I'm already dead right?"

Wilbur startled at the blunt words, stumbling back a step.

His brows pinched, confused. "What?"

Tommy straightened his spine despite the pain the action caused. It was impossible to miss the massive, dark, spreading stain pooling along his torso.

He gestured at it. "You don't need to kill me. I'm already dead."

Wilbur, for once, looked surprised. Alarmed. More than Tommy had ever seen him express. His eyes went wide. "I--what--we're not--" His gaze fell to Tommy's stomach and they went even wider. "You've been shot."

Tommy nodded, mouth set in a grim line. "I don't have much time left. So if you could just--*please*, just--" He sighed, a boy defeated. His voice was tiny the next time he spoke, smaller and sadder than he had ever used with Wilbur. "You don't need to kill me. You can just leave. I'm dying."

And Wilbur finally got it, finally connected the pieces, finally lifted his gaze to glance around the tiny room and notice the bloodstains painting the walls, the pool of dark liquid on the ground, the way Tommy winced with every movement, and he sucked in a sharp breath.

And then his eyes landed on the old Lmanburg flag and he froze. Stared. Turned to get a closer look at it.

His back was turned. He was staring at the flag. His back was turned.

Tommy saw one last, final chance.

Faster than he even knew he was capable of, he snatched the screwdriver from the desk, and he lunged.

Except he had clearly misjudged his current capability for movement. Because the instant he left the chair his world erupted into pain. His vision flashed and darkened, blood rushed to his head, his knees wobbled underneath him, and then suddenly he wasn't lunging but falling, and the screwdriver wasn't so much a weapon of murder as the most immediate sharp object that he could stab himself with.

And he was falling. Oh Prime, he was falling.

How he hated that feeling of weightlessness, the moment of desperation as he tried to catch himself, the sight of the ground getting closer and closer. How he hated the anticipation.

He couldn't watch, so he clenched his eyes shut and waited to hit the floor.

Except he never did. He just stayed suspended in the air, floating. Weightless.

Was he actually dead this time?

It was warm. And comfortable. He liked it.

Someone, somewhere was calling out his name distantly. His fake one at least.

Tommy blinked open his eyes to see who and--

Oh. That was Wilbur. Again.

He was close now, much closer than before. Tommy could see the freckles on the bridge of his nose, his long, dark eyelashes, the flecks of gold in his eyes. Why was--oh.

He was holding him in his arms. That was why.

That warmth, that weightlessness--Wilbur had caught him. He must have moved in a flash from across the room, must have seen the movement from his peripheral vision and acted on pure reflexes to have him

cradled like that in his arms, looking down at him.

His mouth moved. His voice sounded distant, slow, like he was underwater. Tommy couldn't make out the words.

He blinked, once, twice. Slowly. His body felt heavy.

Wilbur was more frantic now, his mouth moving with sounds Tommy couldn't hear, his eyes flickering rapidly across his face, one of his large, steady hands cupping his cheek.

Tommy leaned into it mindlessly. Wilbur's face crumpled.

It was nice not to be alone.

His eyes fluttered shut. They didn't open again.

There was no fog of sleep this time. When Tommy woke up, it was with a gasp. In barely an instant he went from lying down, blackout unconscious, to shooting straight up, eyes wide and alert and flitting around the room.

It was white, overwhelmingly so. That was the first red flag.

Nothing in the slums stayed white, not for long. There was too much dirt and grime and blood for that. But here, the walls, the ceiling, the tiles on the floor, the sheets of the bed he was sitting on, everything was pristine, bright white. No grime or blood to be seen.

Which reminded him, how the fuck was he alive? He was supposed to be dead, not here in this strange, white room without an ounce of pain--what the fuck, why was there no pain either? He hadn't even noticed the absence of the white hot agony at first, but he felt totally, perfectly *fine*. And he shouldn't have. He had been shot. His arm had been split into two. He should have been in pain.

But he wasn't.

What the fuck.

He looked down at himself, intent on checking his wounds when he realized that, *holy shit*, his clothes were gone too. He was dressed in some sort of white tunic and loose black pants and a quick scan of the room revealed his clothes were nowhere to be seen, and if his clothes were gone that meant...so were his weapons. So were his tools.

He was defenseless.

Tommy's breath hitched. Why wasn't he dead?

He had to be with the Antarctic gang, right? His memories of earlier were vague, a little blurry, but he knew that he had blacked out in Wilbur's arms. The gang had to have captured him.

So why wasn't he dead? He was a loose end now, a liability, someone that needed to be handled and then swiftly silenced.

But... Tommy glanced at his left arm, trapped in a heavy plaster cast, pulled up his shirt to see his bullet wound all stitched up. The gang hadn't killed him at all. If anything, they had tried to patch him up.

...No. No, that was impossible.

Maybe Wilbur left him for dead and someone else had discovered him. Maybe the gang still needed him for another job. Maybe they needed to find out how much he knew before they finished him off.

Or...maybe this was something darker. He had heard stories of gang leaders who especially enjoyed torture, who would heal their victims just so they could tear them apart again. Maybe this was that.

Whatever was happening, it was nothing good. Gangs didn't help out street urchins like him without a deeper purpose, without wanting something in return. He needed to find his way out, and he needed to do it fast.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed. His feet landed on the cold tile.

Okay. Breathe. He could do this. He just had to take it one step at a time.

Inventory. What did he have at his disposal. What could he use.

His bed and sheets. Useless.

His new clothes. Unusable. He had nothing else to wear, so he certainly wasn't taking them off.

A single, metal chair next to his bed. Had potential, but ultimately not worth it. Couldn't exactly lug the furniture around with him if he wanted to make a stealthy escape, could he?

A near-empty bottle of wine and a half-full wineglass, sitting on a small bedside table. Now that...

That he could use. He grabbed the bottle of wine, dumping the remainder of the liquid into a little puddle on the floor, and then, as quietly as he could manage, smashed it against the table.

The sound still echoed through the room.

He waited a minute, two. No one appeared at the door. Tommy grinned.

Now he had his very own shank. Half of the bottle shattered against the table, leaving the edges jagged and sharp and well-suited for stabbing. It wasn't perfect, not nearly as good as his staff, but until he could get something better, the bottle would have to do.

Okay. Step one, done. He had a makeshift weapon.

Step two. Assess the situation. What did he know.

He could walk. That was a start.

He had been given painkillers. It would explain why he couldn't feel his arm, his stomach, the cuts and scrapes that still dotted his body. They were probably wearing off considering he was awake and moving around again, so the pain would return and in all likelihood it would be crippling. He was on a time limit.

He had been captured and healed by the Antarctic gang. Given the way the glass of wine and the chair had been left there, they'd be back any minute to check on him. They would likely torture, interrogate, or exploit him. They had no good intentions.

He was trapped in their base. It was almost definitely in the most dangerous part of the Underground. He was unfamiliar with the area. He had no way to escape.

...

Okay. Maybe that was enough assessing the situation. Maybe it was just time to go.

Tommy hefted his broken bottle in front of him like a knife and stepped in front of the glass door to his room. It slid open with a quiet hiss.

He might have appreciated how high tech it was if he wasn't, you know, in fear for his life.

He stepped softly out of the room and ended up in some sort of hallway, complete with deep red walls, dark mahogany floors, and matching thick red carpets that were perfect for muffling his footsteps. Other glass doors dotted the sides of the hallway, leading to more unknown rooms.

He made his way down the hallway on his toes with the bottle held out in front of him, always looking over his shoulder warily. He glanced through the doors as he passed by, looking for signs of an exit. He didn't find any, though he did stumble on a billiards room, a literal hate shrine to anteaters (courtesy of Wilbur, he assumed), a room full of training dummies, countless others. Some of the doors were opaque, the glass blurred, and he didn't dare try to go in those. Not when there could be someone lying in wait on the other side.

An hour of searching later and he still hadn't found an exit. Just more twists through the hallway, more glances over his shoulder, and, more than anything, more rooms. Some of them didn't even make sense. He had passed a pool, at least *three* separate lounges, and a room that was literally just filled with gold. That was it. Floor to ceiling, wall to wall, just piles of gold bars. What the *fuck*.

So maybe that was why, when he found the kitchen, he finally left the safety of the hallway and entered a room.

He was hungry and tired and scared, and he could feel the pain meds starting to wear off, and the last time he had eaten was before he left to climb the Walls, and he hadn't run into anyone yet. So when he saw granite countertops and a fridge in a dim room through the glass door, he caved.

The lights in the room stayed off when he entered, the only light coming from the hallway and the fridge's glowing display. Shadows consumed the far end of the room.

Great. Fine. A little darkness wouldn't hurt.

The room was surprisingly...homey, for a super-serious, super-secret gang, with cabinets of glassware perched above the countertops, an apron hanging on the wall, paintings of landscapes and stars and birds on every wall. A heavy, wooden dining table sat across from the countertops, three chairs placed around it, a small vase of--holy shit.

Tommy's eyes went wide. He almost dropped his wine bottle shank.

Holy *shit*.

That was--those were--was that a vase of *flowers*?

Food was forgotten. Tommy drew closer.

He had never seen any before, not in person. There were pictures, yes, some paintings for sure, but nothing real. Nothing alive.

There weren't any flowers in Manburg. There hadn't been for years. Decades.

And yet, here they were.

He couldn't make them out very well in the dim light, but he could tell they were red, deep red, small enough to fit into the palm of his hand, the little scarlet petals circling around a tiny brown center.

He wanted to touch one. He set his makeshift weapon down on the table. There was no one to stop him.

Slowly, reverently, he reached out a hand, a finger, just so he could touch a petal, just so he could feel something so alive and precious against his skin.

“Pretty, aren’t they?” A voice asked from the darkness.

Tommy shrieked. The bottle was back in his hand in an instant, the flowers abandoned as he scanned the shadows, searching for the source.

Something moved in the shadows, something large and terrifying, stepping just barely into the dim light.

Large, glowing eyes. A black cape. Massive, dark wings, stretching out. Like an angel of death and shadows had ascended to drag him down to hell

“Hey there, mate.” The monster said.

Tommy screamed.

Chapter End Notes

fun fact, the scenes in this chapter were the whole reason i started writing this fic in the first place

you guys were having like full on breakdowns in my comment section last time, and although it was *extremely* funny to me and i wish it could have lasted longer, its been four months and 75000 words so i felt like it was about time we got our sbi meetup

hope you all enjoyed! thanks again for the kudos, comments, and the art!

be back soon! in fact, ill be back in only FIVE DAYS. that's right, your eyes did not deceive you, chapters will now be coming out every five days instead of every week. worship me, peasants. i am a kind and merciful goddess.

:))

FANART ARCHIVE

Chapter Summary

hey guys, remember last chapter when i tried to set a regular and consistent schedule of every five days?

yeah, fuck that.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Fanart

I LOVE FAN ARTISTS, SHOW THESE SOME LOVE

from wackywasabi9 on insta--the heisting getup



from littlestcloudshop on insta--tommy's fall



from Wadd3i on twitter and waddei on tumblr







from sticks_is_a_magpie on insta -- the room above the bakery



[Dasani Tsunami Animatic](#)

Chapter End Notes

I legit cannot express how cool I find all the art and it's amazing how much detail is in it! I can't thank you all enough for reading and sticking with my fic this far :)) more art will be added over time as i find them!

see you soon!

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Tommy meets the Antarctic gang

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy Innett was absolutely, undeniably fucked.

Drug lords, he could handle. Guard patrols were no big thing. Murderous drones were his ordinary Tuesday morning.

But a fucking demon? A monster of night with the darkness wrapped around it like a cloak, the black silhouette of its wings spanning half the room?

That was where he drew the line. No thank you, he could not fucking handle that, not today. Not *any* day.

Hence him screaming. And screaming. And screaming. And then the scream died in his throat and he was stumbling back and scrambling to point his only weapon at it.

The thing didn't move. It just...waited. Watched. A predator stalking its prey.

The bottle shank suddenly felt very, very small. Very insufficient. He pointed the jagged edge at the looming shadow. It shook in his hand.

The creature just stared at him. Its eyes fucking *gleamed* in the dark.

Tommy swallowed down another scream.

The *thing* sighed. "I guess Wilbur didn't fill you in then."

Oh Prime. It was speaking to him again. Why the fuck was it *speaking* to him?

No. No no no. Don't panic. He couldn't panic. Couldn't things like this fuckin' like, smell fear or some shit? Probably.

That was fine though, because he was totally good. Completely fine. Dealing with this like a fuckin' champ. Never been better. Having the time of his life.

The bottle stayed pointed at the shadows.

"Hey mate," the creature said casually, like it was taking a stroll in the park and not about to suck out Tommy's soul or something, "Take it easy. Why don't we just put down the bottle and we can get everything all settled, yeah?"

Yeah, because listening to Mr. Grim reaper lookin' death angel man over there seemed like a great idea.

That'd be a no thank you from him, fuckin' shadow bitch. He liked his shank very much where it was now, in his good hand, pointing at the most immediate threat to his life.

Tommy clutched the bottle tighter.

The creature's wings twitched. He couldn't quite tell in the darkness, but he thought it might have tilted its head. Like a confused cat, or a curious bird.

So just to really drive the point home, he shook his head. Firmly. Aggressively. More than a little bit shakily.

The creature huffed. "You're afraid. Of course you are. I gave Wilbur *one* job. Just watch Theseus until I get back, I told him, and he probably left you to go--" the thing sighed again, its glowing eyes locking onto him again, "Don't worry, mate. We'll get this all sorted out."

Was that supposed to be reassuring? Because it was not. He was not feeling reassured. 'All sorted out' was vague and noncommittal and menacing. 'All sorted out' was what you said when you were about to murder someone and hide the body.

Sure enough, the shadow took a threatening step towards him.

Tommy's reaction was instantaneous.

Raw instinct and years of self preservation took hold, and in a flash he was jumping away from the creature to match its movement towards him, his feet shifting to prepare for a fight, his stance widening and steadying.

The monster froze. Tommy froze. They looked at each other.

And then, carefully, holding his gaze with those bright, gleaming eyes, the creature took another step towards him. Slower this time. Like it was testing the waters. Trying to lull him into a false sense of security.

Tommy's breath hitched. "Stay--stay the fuck away from me."

He glanced over his shoulder, just for an instant, at the glass door and the hallway beyond it. His only way out. His only chance for escape.

Tommy had always been a person of action. He wasn't just going to wait to be picked off.

Casually, subtly, he shifted his feet. Just a little. It was barely even a noticeable action, just a slight turn, just enough that when the moment struck he could push off his toes and go from a standstill to a dead sprint in the blink of an eye.

He took a deep breath, steeling himself, gathering the last vestiges of energy, and then--

The light from the hallway shifted, darkened, behind him. He glanced over his shoulder sharply.

Two dark silhouettes loomed in the doorway.

Fuck.

Tommy's mind was already racing, already calculating his odds of escape now that there was not one but three enemies to avoid, when the lights in the room flickered on.

He was so caught up in it, in fact, that it took him a moment to register exactly who was standing at the door, blocking his only escape. And then it hit him.

On one side, the masked assassin from earlier, this time sans cape and mask. His face was sharp and pointed and clever, not exactly what Tommy would've expected from the assassin that he had pinned as an

overdramatic idiot, and he might not have recognized him if not for the pink hair.

His red eyes were locked on the makeshift weapon in Tommy's hands.

On the other side, Wilbur.

Double fuck.

There went his escape plan. Wilbur, he might have been able to handle. The man was tall and spindly and he was quick and slippery. Hard to catch.

But with the masked man in the picture that was a no-go. He was steadier than Wilbur, broader. His shoulders practically filled the frame of the door. No amount of agility could get Tommy past that.

So what the fuck else was he supposed to do? He was sort of at a loss here. Plan A had been to make a stealthy escape, Plan B had been to flat out run, but with three taller, stronger, just generally healthier captors now surrounding him, both of those options had been eliminated. So what now?

Fight? That was dumb. Again, taller, stronger, healthier. Even if he fought, he wouldn't last long.

Bargain? Yeah, like that would work. Because he was sure Shadow Monster, Mask Guy, and Wilbur were just *full* of empathy and mercy and kind-heartedness.

So that left him with waiting it out. Playing on defense, looking for an opening, and then striking swiftly and decisively and without hesitation.

Which meant assessing the situation so he could plan his next move. He hadn't quite gotten a look at Shadow Monster in the light yet, maybe he would be able to spot a weakness. He turned back to look--

Oh. Well. This was embarrassing.

Shadow Monster was just a normal guy. Which like. Obviously. Monsters didn't exist, other than the ones past the Walls. He knew that, of course. He hadn't been scared.

...

Okay, that one had been a lie.

But to be fair, anyone would've assumed the man was a monster in the dark, with only his silhouette as a reference, because the man really did have wings. Massive, powerful, spanning half the room. But instead of flesh and bone, feather and muscle, they were wire and gears. Metal constructs befitting an angel.

They were the most magnificent thing Tommy had ever seen.

Even Sam, the best mechanic in all of East Side, had never made something like these.

He couldn't quite make out all the details, not from halfway across the room, but even from there he could see the metal blades of the feathers, sharp as knives, forged to perfection. He didn't doubt they doubled as a weapon on top of--wait, hold up, how had he forgotten that they were *wings*. Could--did they work? Could this guy fucking *fly*?

A far-off voice chuckled. "You like the wings, huh?"

Tommy tore his eyes from the miracle of machinery to look at the man attached to them.

For someone with such ingenious technology he looked...surprisingly ordinary.

He was wearing a simple black cloak under the wings, and beneath that a thin green shirt and black pants. There was no cape and boots like the Mask Guy, no torn trench coat like with Wilbur. Just simple, practical clothes and a sturdy pair of shoes. He was also short, Tommy was pleased to note, much shorter than he had previously thought. That would certainly give him at least a bit of an advantage if it ever came down to combat.

His eyes flickered up to the man's face. Shoulder length blonde hair, a round face, an intelligent smile. Tommy met a pair of wry blue eyes, half-hidden behind a pair of goggles--those must have been what had gleamed in the dark--and the man's smile faded.

He pushed his goggles to the top of his head, his eyebrows furrowing as he looked over Tommy. "They didn't tell me you were so young."

The words broke his daze in an instant and Tommy was back on guard. The bottle lifted, this time at the winged man. Wilbur and the Mask Guy may have been a threat, but this guy had knife wings. He wasn't taking his chances.

"Theseus," a familiar voice called tersely from behind him, "Why don't we put the bottle down."

And suddenly it hit him. The voice, the assassin's voice, it was so familiar because he *had* heard it before. It was so familiar because that--that was *Technoblade*. And if that was Technoblade...

His eyes locked on the kitchen table. With three chairs placed around it.

There was Wilbur. There was Technoblade. It wouldn't make much sense if the third guy was just a random foot soldier.

Holy fuck, wing guy was Philza. He was meeting *Philza*.

Which also, he realized with a jolt, meant that he was currently trapped in a room with all three leaders of the most dangerous gang in the city.

He didn't put the bottle down.

A floorboard creaked to his left. Tommy snapped to face the sound.

Technoblade had a cautious hand out toward Tommy as he edged around one side of the kitchen, like Tommy was a cornered animal he was trying to soothe.

And he was, wasn't he? Just a skittish, feral animal, fighting its inevitable capture tooth and nail. Because if Technoblade was making his way around the room, that meant Tommy was surrounded. Wilbur blocked his only exit. Philza was opposite of him, his wings splayed out to keep him in as much as possible. And now there was Technoblade between them, forming a strategic triangle around him.

It was smart, he would give them that. In this position, no matter how he positioned himself one of them would always be just out of his sight. He would always have his back to one of them.

Which would, inevitably, leave him open to attack.

Tommy might have appreciated the strategic intelligence of it if he wasn't the target.

The truth of it was, he was trapped. Left turning hopelessly in the middle of their triangle, spinning to point his shank at Wilbur and then Philza and then Technoblade and then back to the start, hoping to spot an opening that didn't exist.

And his time was running out. He could see them trading glances, having an entire conversation with their eyes, planning how to disarm him, taking tentative steps toward him.

They were closing their perimeter, only a few feet away now. Tightening the noose. He was out of time and out of options.

He glanced down at his shank in his hand. The three of their eyes followed it.

There was no fighting them. No brute force here. He had to do what he was best at: run.

He let go of the bottle.

Their eyes followed it as it shattered against the ground, and in that instant he made his move, pushing off his feet to break through their circle.

Wilbur was the first to realize the diversion, his gaze flashing back up to him, and then he was moving, lunging at him, because now Tommy was unarmed and there was nothing to ward them away.

Tommy ducked out of the way, sending Wilbur sprawling into Philza. The two fell to the floor in a tangled pile of feathers and fabric. Good. Two down, one to go.

Pieces of glass embedded in his feet as he turned toward the exit. He hardly felt the pain, not when he could see the door to the room only a dozen feet away.

He ran toward it--

In his peripheral vision, a flash of pink. On pure instinct, Tommy leaned back, pushing himself off feet, and then he was sliding against the ground as Technoblade reached down with one strong arm, trying to grab at him.

He slid behind the man in a flash, connecting a foot with the back of Technoblade's shin in one smooth motion, sending the man collapsing down onto one knee. Tommy slid to a stop.

Wilbur and Philza were still pushing themselves apart. Technoblade was climbing to his feet.

All three of the gang's leaders were down. Tommy finally saw his opening.

Despite popular opinion, Tommy wasn't an idiot. This wasn't a winnable fight. So he pushed himself to his feet in a flash and turned toward the exit.

The door was right there, open wide, a beacon to his freedom just steps away. Holy shit, he had done it. Outsmarted the entire gang of fuckers, even with his arm throbbing and his bullet wound aching again, and now he was fucking free--

A large, calloused hand latched onto his ankle.

His balance was thrown off kilter. His bare foot slipped against the polished floor.

Across the room, Wilbur's eyes widened.

Tommy fell. Again. This time there was no one there to catch him.

His head smashed into the hardwood with a resounding crack.

"Why didn't you tell me he was this young?" A soft, concerned voice cut through the abyss. A faint touch ghosted over his forehead.

"We...we were going to talk about it once you got back from your patrol." Wilbur's voice was quiet.

A sigh. "And I'm sure that would've been great if I didn't get home to find a terrified child wandering around our kitchen, mate."

Child? Tommy's mind drew out of the clutches of sleep just a little further. They couldn't possibly be talking about him, could they? *He* wasn't a fucking child.

A gruff voice cut in. "He was supposed to be out for another four hours, Phil."

"I don't want to hear it. You were supposed to be watching over him, not knocking him out again, Technoblade. Prime knows the kid had enough head trauma as it was."

A smug chuckle from across the room. "Ooohhhh, the full name, now you're in trouble."

"Shut up Wilbur. It was an accident." The gruff voice practically growled, "And you left him too."

The room went silent. There was a long, solemn pause. "I know."

An even longer silence. Tommy's eyelashes fluttered.

And then, suddenly. "He can't be older than nineteen, Phil. You know how I feel about kids in our line of work. *Look* at him. He looks just like--"

"I know, mate."

A deep voice cut in. "Shh. He's waking up."

Tommy's eyes blinked open.

Tommy woke up with a throbbing head, an aching body, and a gag in his mouth. Fucking hell. In the span of twenty four hours he had fallen from the Walls, gotten shot, been kidnapped, and then had been knocked out yet again. The day literally could not get any worse.

And that's when he realized he was tied to a chair.

Well. Shit.

His eyes adjusted to the light of the room. It instantly became more apparent why.

He was at the head of their kitchen table. Wilbur lounged in a seat on his left, a leg kicked up onto the table. On the opposite side stood Philza with his hands resting against the top of his chair, his massive wings draped behind him. Across the room, Technoblade leaned against a wall, expression bored and arms crossed.

They were all watching him. Clearly, the interrogation had already begun.

Instinctively, Tommy began to test the restraints, pulling at the ropes around his wrists and ankles. Just to see if there was any hope of escape. They didn't budge. He couldn't move, couldn't run, could feel their eyes, watching him.

The gag was rubbing against his cheeks. The coarse ropes were cutting off circulation in his hands. Someone must have tied them too tight.

His heart began to pound.

If there was one thing he hated, it was being trapped.

Suddenly it was all he could think about. He began to twist and turn and rock the heavy chair, just trying to get the binds to shift, just so he knew it was possible, but they still weren't moving--and now he was cursing them out, but the sound just came out as a muffled slur and the gag was cutting into his mouth, and the chair tilted dangerously back and forth but Tommy kept trying to struggle--

Wilbur reached a hand towards him, hovering over him, "Theseus, you don't need to--will you stop? You're not going to be able to break them."

This, of course, only made Tommy struggle more. As if he was just going to sit still and let them win? Wilbur wished. The ropes had to wear down eventually. He'd keep at it until then. If anything, annoying Wilbur was a bonus, just so he could see--

"Stop." Technoblade snapped from where he was lurking against the wall.

It was just one simple word. Just a single syllable. But it was low, dangerous. A warning not to test the man's patience. The *or else* was implied.

Tommy stopped. His hands froze against the armrests, his body stilled in his chair. The only thing that moved were his eyes, flicking frantically from one gang leader to the next, following their movements.

Philza shifted to be closer to him, crouching so he was at eye level, holding Tommy's anxious gaze.

"Hey there, mate." He smiled in a way that Tommy thought was supposed to be comforting. Tommy wasn't fooled. It felt more like a predator baring its teeth at its prey. "There's no need to worry, we're not here to hurt you."

Oh. So we were lying now. Good to know.

Tommy glared pointedly down at the ropes tying his hands to the chair.

"Fuck you!" He yelled, and it came out muffled around the gag. Though from the way Philza's smile vanished, he was pretty sure the man had gotten the general message.

"I don't think he likes the restraints." Technoblade informed the room, and gee, with observational skills like that it was no wonder he was considered the best of the best in the Underground.

Wilbur rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well no shit Technoblade."

"They were *your* idea."

A sharp pang of betrayal jolted through him. Tommy's eyes shot to Wilbur.

The man wouldn't meet his gaze. "It was a necessary precaution. He's seen our faces. If he gets out, he's a security risk."

Phil seemed to sense the blooming tension and mercifully stepped in.

"Yes, well I'm sure Theseus will be much better behaved now, so...?" He glanced expectantly between Wilbur and Tommy.

"Fine." Wilbur sighed, stepping closer, and suddenly his hands were reaching around Tommy's face, undoing the gag.

Phil crouched back down to his level in the corner of his eye as Wilbur's hands worked out the knot holding the gag in place. "By the way, you have a name, mate? Or should we keep calling you Theseus?"

Tommy stayed silent. He wasn't a fool.

Wilbur's hands began pulling away with the gag, and oh Prime, he knew it wasn't smart, but now his mouth was free and he was going to make them fucking regret tying him up.

His head sprang towards Wilbur's hand. His jaw snapped.

Wilbur jumped out of his reach. Just barely. Damn.

"He just tried to bite me!" he screeched.

And then all the suppressed anxiety and anger broke free and Tommy was screaming, pulling at the restraints with clenched fists. His body shook with rage. "Fuck you, get away from me! I'll maim you, I'll fucking stab out your eyes, *don't touch me--*"

"Whose idea was it to take out the gag again?" Technoblade chimed.

"*I'll kill you first.*" Tommy hissed.

Philza ignored the jab, half-smiling down at Tommy, completely unphased. "Mate, I think we all know you won't be doing much of anything with these restraints. So why don't we all just settle in..."

It was more than a little condescending and Tommy wouldn't usually take that shit, but even through the haze of rage he knew Philza was right; the ropes were sturdy. And the way he was standing was positioning his sharp, deadly wings right next to Tommy's face...

Tommy quieted down.

Phil nodded encouragingly, smiling at him in a way that made Tommy want to punch him. His hands clenched the armrests of the chair. "There we go. Now, it's only proper that we start with some introductions, don't you think? Wilbur you know. Over there with the hair is--"

"Yeah, yeah that's Technoblade, you're Philza, I get the memo. Can we get to why we're all really here now?" Tommy interrupted, because honestly he was getting tired of the small talk. Why bother with pleasantries when he was tied down, completely defenseless? It was pointless to put up a kind front.

Philza tilted his head again in that uncanny, bird-like way, studying him with furrowed eyebrows. "Excuse me?"

Tommy scowled. He was done being subtle. He would get answers, one way or another. "What do you want? Why am I here?"

Technoblade gave him a dry look from across the room. "When we found you, you had a concussion, five broken ribs, an arm snapped clean in half, and a bullet in your stomach. Take a guess. You needed to be healed."

So that was the story they were going with then? That they just *cared*? As if.

"Fat chance. Tell me the truth, assholes." he demanded, "Why did you go to my room and bring me here?"

"We only came to help you." Phil insisted.

"I never fucking wanted your help." Tommy shot back, "I never asked for that."

"You called Wilbur--"

Tommy bristled. "Yeah, to *apologize*. Are all of you dumb? I failed my job. It was...fuckin' ...professional courtesy. That was all. I didn't need a rescue mission."

Wilbur frowned. "You were dying--"

"And I had come to terms with it. I was fine."

Tense, uneasy silence.

"We were just worried." Phil said quietly.

Tommy glowered. "And there you go again. That's *such* a shit excuse. You think I'm an idiot? Like Wilbur would've come to help me without some ulterior motive. *Please*. Wilbur never even wanted me here. He's been rooting from my downfall from the start."

More tense silence. Tommy's gaze flicked from a distraught-looking Wilbur to a concerned Philza, who was staring at the man questioningly, to Technoblade, who was still leaning against the wall, seemingly happy to just observe.

"...what?" Wilbur's voice pulled him out of his thoughts.

The man sounded...confused. Like he didn't understand. Like he didn't know what he had done.

Another trick. When would the deception end?

Tommy's eyes shot to him with a glare. "Just how stupid do you think I am? As if I wouldn't do just the smallest amount of research and realize that no one knows Philza even *exists*? As if I wouldn't question that? And then when it's always been so painfully obvious that Wilbur despised me, when he snapped at me with every other word? You thought I wouldn't start to put the pieces together? He hates my guts."

Wilbur went a little bit pale.

"No, I never--" Wilbur began to protest and Tommy raised an eyebrow.

Wilbur cut himself off at the look. Paused. Reconsidered.

"Well, maybe I did. At the beginning." He amended, "Not *now*."

Yeah, because Tommy was sure he had totally just *charmed* all of that animosity out of Wilbur. Because if there was one thing Tommy was known for it was his *charisma*.

"Uh huh. Sure. As far as I'm concerned the only one of you lot that I could ever trust not to stab me in the back was fucking Philza over there." He jerked his head at the winged man, "And that was only because he thought I was useful. Who knows what he'll do with me now."

Philza frowned, his lips parting to reply, when Wilbur abruptly pushed himself out of his seat, leaning over the table towards Tommy and glaring at him.

"That's bullshit. We're trustworthy, when have we ever lied to you?"

"*When have you ever--*" Tommy gaped. He couldn't possibly be serious. He could not *seriously* be asking Tommy when they had ever lied.

Because the times were fucking countless.

"You know what, you want one fucking example?" He snapped, "The drones. Dormant, you said. Yeah, well they seemed real fucking dormant when they pushed me out of the nest into nine hundred feet of open air."

Philza froze. Wilbur went pale. Even Technoblade sucked in a sharp breath.

Wilbur was the first to find his voice.

"You--you fell? Off the Walls?" he ran a shaky hand through his hair. "How--you followed our instructions? You didn't go off plan?"

Holy shit. Holy *shit*. Were they really trying to fucking pin this on *him* right now? They had knowingly made him climb up into a nest of live, murderous drones, and they were trying to blame *him*? If the ropes weren't holding him down to the chair he thought he might have lunged in that moment. Might have gone and tackled Wilbur and punched him right in his stupid, pretentious face.

"Oh my Prime, *yes* I followed the plan." Tommy snarled, "You really think I decided that the middle of a drone nest a gazillion feet from the ground was the best place to improvise? I started cutting one open and they all fucking flew at me. They just *knew*."

"How--that shouldn't be possible..." Wilbur stammered. He glanced over his shoulder, over to where Technoblade was lurking in the back.

The man was staring down at his hands, face twisted into a frustrated sort of confusion. "It's been eleven years. Software update, I suppose."

Wilbur turned back to Tommy. "We didn't--truly, we didn't know Theseus. We wouldn't have sent you in there if we did. I swear."

For a second, just a second, the raw sincerity in Wilbur's gaze almost had him convinced. He wanted to believe it, that they had his back. Maybe it had really just been a mistake.

And then he remembered the blood on their hands, how much they had already screwed him over, the ropes currently tying him down, and he snapped out of his delusions. "Well, I see how you all got into the criminal underground type of business." he muttered bitterly, "You're great liars."

The entire gang went quiet.

"How did you even survive?" Philza whispered.

For the first time in their little interrogation, Tommy faltered. He didn't think he could relive it. Those seconds of hopelessness, the feeling of the air rushing past him, the deafening buzz of the drones...it was still too raw. "I can't--it was--that's for me to know."

He shook the memory off, ignoring the way Philza tilted his head again, the way he could feel Technoblade's curious gaze burning into his skin. "Point is, I fucking crawl back to my home ready to die in peace, and then out of nowhere this dramatic-ass amateur assassin with a fucking cape bursts into my room out of the blue--"

He jolted as he remembered yet another inconsistency in their narrative.

"--and that's another thing! How the fuck did you even find me?"

The room went tense.

"The, uh..." Wilbur began, his gaze locked on the ground, "The emergency beacon had a tracker in it."

Tommy's lips pressed into a thin line. "Hmph. Trustworthy, my ass."

There was a long, awkward pause.

Techno cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Uh, you weren't in any houses nearby so we looked on foot. There was a trail of blood leading to one room. It wasn't hard to connect the dots."

Smooth. Real subtle subject change on his part.

Tommy eyed him. "Yeah, okay, thanks for that, but you still haven't explained *why*."

"Well, you did have all our stuff. I wanted my microchip." Technoblade replied dryly.

Philza turned to glare at him. "Techno! Not the time!"

But Tommy was already considering the man's words, nodding in agreement, "No, no, see, that makes more sense. At least this one's honest."

"He's not--" Wilbur ran a hand down his face, "That was a *joke*, Theseus."

Tommy was clearly unconvinced.

"Yeah. Okay." he responded skeptically.

Phil exhaled. "Really mate, we got a phone call from our best thief at the break of dawn, half-delusional and desperate, sounding like he's on the brink of death, and we just got concerned. That's all."

From the corner of his eye he saw one of Philza's wings stretch out and nudge Technoblade in the shoulder. The man sighed.

"We protect our assets. You--" He paused, searching for words, "You're a decent thief."

Gee, thanks. A decent thief? What *high* praise.

Tommy bit his lip to keep back his retort. He didn't want the gag to come back.

"We were just worried, Theseus." Wilbur added.

They really weren't giving up on their farce, were they? Even after all the holes he had poked in their arguments, they still insisted on this insane idea of them caring for his well being.

Fine. His way didn't work. He'd try playing by their rules.

"Fine then. Sure. You came because you *cared*." Tommy paused, letting the words sink in as his eyes traced a path from one man to the next. "Let me go then. I'm sure you lot have super secret gang things to do that are way more important than patching up little old me. You fixed the worst of the injuries, I'm no longer 'on the brink of death', so all your worries should be assuaged. I'm good to go. I'll be out of your hair within the hour."

Here was his tell, his final card. A 'no' to his plea was nonsensical, illogical, contradictory. A 'no' sent their whole argument of good intentions crashing to the floor.

Wilbur's mouth opened and closed helplessly, trying and failing to find a logical counterargument, and Tommy knew his answer.

He couldn't help but be a little disappointed in him. Even after everything, he'd still had a little hope.

"Back to those slums?" Technoblade cut in.

Tommy's gaze shifted from Wilbur to the man and he shrugged. "I've got nowhere else to go, do I? Can't even go back to my own house now that you assholes have plundered it."

Philza watched the entire conversation with quiet interest.

"But...the *slums*? They're disgusting." Wilbur's face twisted distaste, rubbing his hands together like even the thought of them made him feel *dirty*.

That was the last straw.

He wasn't wrong. The slums were horrible and they were filthy and covered in grime but they were his, and only he could fucking criticize them. Not this asshole who lived in his big-ass underground mansion far from the guards and the starvation and the death. He didn't get to sit there on his high horse and act like East Side, like *Tommy*, was somehow less than.

"Shut the fuck up, dickhead." Tommy growled, "That's my home you're talking about."

"But we can't just let you go back there." Wilbur cried, "You're just a kid!"

Just a kid, of course. That's what they always said, that's why he had kept his identity secret in the first place, because the instant people found out about his age he went from *greatest thief in the Underground* to *kid*. It didn't matter that he had spent years thieving and even longer alone on the streets. Because to them he was just a kid. Frail, weak, unable to handle things by himself.

It was a shit excuse, worse because it didn't even make sense.

"Uh huh. You know how many kids are out on those streets?" Tommy snarled, "I don't see them here. You gonna start an orphanage down here for the rest of them?"

Wilbur frowned. "That's different."

It wasn't different. Not at all. He thought of Ranboo, of the boy from the Bordertowns. There were kids up there who were better than he could ever be, kids who deserved more. He wasn't one of them. It wasn't different.

The gang just wanted him, and they would say whatever they needed to to get him.

All of the fight went out of him. Tommy scoffed quietly, "Yeah. That's what I thought."

"We really just--" Wilbur started.

Tommy's head hung. He closed his eyes. They just weren't giving in, were they? They were never going to let him go.

"Yeah. Sure." he said dismissively.

"Mate--" Philza sighed from somewhere above him, "Fine."

"What?" Tommy gasped, his head snapping up to stare at the man in the same instant that Techno gawked a *Phil?* and Wilbur protested with *Excuse me?*

"No. No, the kid is right." Phil interrupted, and then his eyes swung to Tommy. "Fine. You can leave."

Tommy perked up. "Really?"

They'd really given in? He had really thought he was screwed for a minute, but that was way easier than he had expected.

Seriously, that was *easy*.

Like, almost too easy. His eyes narrowed in sudden suspicion. "What's the catch?"

Philza half-smiled down at him. "No catch. You can leave, just...in a few days. Once you're healed."

Tommy tensed.

Oh. So that's what they were going with. For a second, he had almost thought they were sincere with the no catch thing. Guess not.

Tommy wasn't an idiot. He wasn't naive. He knew what their endgame was here. If they had their way a few days would turn into a few weeks and then a few months and then he would *never* leave.

They would lure him in with the promise of comfort and shelter and by the time they started torturing him or using him or interrogating him he would be too docile to make himself escape.

It was a trap. He could spot it from a mile away.

But he wasn't exactly in a position to negotiate. Philza wasn't phrasing it like a question. He wasn't asking for permission. This was an order, clear as day, and it would happen whether or not Tommy was on board. Better to make them think he was agreeable so they would let their guard down.

He looked up into Philza's wise blue eyes and nodded grimly. "Fine. Deal."

It wasn't ideal. He was trapped now. They'd surely try to break him.

It wouldn't matter. The gang had forgotten who they were dealing with--a master thief, an experienced escapist, a king in the Underground's black market of rare goods and stolen tech. He was Theseus. He'd get his freedom.

All he needed to do was escape.

Chapter End Notes

you really thought everything was gonna be all soft and fluffy once the gang and Tommy met up? you wish.

hope you all enjoyed! next chapter should be out by sunday.

thanks again for all your lovely comments :))

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Tommy is being held by the Antarctic gang. He's not a big fan of it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They removed his restraints. That was their first mistake.

It was clear they underestimated him from the second they took off the ropes. They had the perfect strategic advantage with the restraints--he was unable to run, unable to fight, basically completely defenseless with his hands and feet immobilized. And yet, they undid them. It was an entirely foolish decision to unleash him, and Tommy didn't think the leaders of the most infamous gang in the city were dumb. They simply didn't see him as a threat.

Tommy looked forward to proving them wrong.

Their second was brushing off his silence. Tommy wasn't quiet. It was just a general rule of the universe, a law of nature. He was clever, he was quick, but he wasn't quiet. The opposite, in fact. So when he stayed silent as they undid his ropes, it should have been a major red flag. Even more so when he remained compliant as the three of them led him back to the white room.

But they didn't say anything. Didn't even seem to notice it at all.

Philza, he could understand. It was his first time meeting Tommy, after all. Technoblade was less excusable, but the man did seem to have trouble picking up on social cues, so it still made sense. But Wilbur? He had spent *weeks* worth of time with Tommy, and not once had he ever been anywhere near this docile. He should have known something was up.

Yet he gave Tommy nothing more than a few questioning looks as he and Technoblade sat him on the bed, picked up the shattered glass shards on the floor, and dressed the fresh cuts on his feet without even a hint of his usual snark. He didn't even question it when he offered Tommy painkillers and all the boy did was shake his head.

So really, it was going to be their own fault when he escaped. It wasn't like there weren't warning signs. Tommy was being *quiet*. Wilbur should have known.

They left his room unlocked. That was their third mistake.

He was sure they would've locked the glass door, trapped him in the room like a caged animal, but when he managed to hobble over to it a few minutes after the gang finally left him it slid open with a quiet hiss, exactly like before.

Tommy supposed it was their idea of a show of good faith, a reward for being so cooperative. A way to give the illusion of freedom.

As if he would fall for something so simplistic. Just another sign that they underestimated him.

They just handed him an easy escape. They were fools if they thought he wouldn't use it.

But again, the Antarctic gang weren't fools. It was a test, it had to be. Surely he was being watched. Running would only sever the fragile trust the gang had with him, and then he'd be back to square one.

So he hobbled back to his bed, hoisting himself up on the edge of it. The door slid shut behind him.

And then he waited. Just stared at one of the blank white walls and receded into his own mind, tuning out the fear, the anxiety, the bone-deep ache of his arm, just waiting. No point in wasting more energy on his usual spunk. This was do or die, all or nothing. He couldn't fuck around, not this time.

So he waited.

An hour or so later, the fluorescent lights of his room suddenly went dark, and Tommy snapped back to the world. His eyes adjusted to the darkness. He listened for a second, two.

No voices. No footsteps. He was in the clear.

Quietly, carefully, Tommy lifted himself from the bed and set his bare feet on the floor. The edges of his vision went a little fuzzy as he stood and he grabbed onto the edge of the bed for balance, just for a second.

And then he was off, padding across the room without a sound. The door hissed open a moment later.

If the hallways were confusing in the light, in the darkness they were a labyrinth. Nothing was recognizable, all the rooms dark, every turn met with an identical stretch of hallway. What felt like hours of aimless walking later, Tommy was sure he had passed the same landscape painting at least three times. He was considering just giving up and going back to his room before he got caught, when he turned down a hallway and a faint sound snatched his attention.

Muffled voices came from one of the rooms. Tiny beams of light shone from the crack of the door.

The smart thing to do would be to ignore them. They were irrelevant to his escape. He still hadn't found an exit to the vast underground lair, and he couldn't afford to waste time with pointless detours.

But...Tommy was curious. He couldn't help it. Someone was in there, in the middle of the night, whispering, conspiring. Probably about important gang business. All the top secret stuff. Info that he could use or sell. So really listening in wasn't so much a detour as a, uh...a tactical recon mission. Right?

He crept closer.

"...don't like having him here. The kid's clearly got some sort of divine power on his side. It's a miracle he's survived this long. The way I see it, either his luck holds out and he escapes and sells us out, or it doesn't and he ends up dead because of us. Prime knows, he's already half-dead." Low, melodic. Even with the door muffling the sound he could hear the footsteps, pacing back and forth, the crack of knuckles being popped. Wilbur.

"I feel like we've had this conversation before." A dry voice interjected. Technoblade. "You're right. The kid is half-dead. Which is exactly why you don't need to worry about him going anywhere. He'll be fine."

Well they would certainly see about that, wouldn't they? Perhaps it was too early to revel in his near-escape, but even as he crouched not twenty feet from his captors Tommy couldn't help but smirk. Once again, it was plainly evident that they underestimated him.

Wilbur ignored Techno. The pacing got more rapid. "No. I am not going to let you and Phil pull your weird-ass...*initiation* crap. I mean, you saw him, he's a kid! And we made him climb the Walls!"

A long pause.

"Well, technically...*you* made him climb them." Technoblade muttered, slow but matter-of-fact. Like he knew he was right, but wasn't sure if he should be saying the words out loud.

The footsteps stopped abruptly. A sharp intake of breath echoed through the hallway.

Tommy had no idea what they meant, but he could tell the conversation was about him and he could tell Wilbur was pissed. Technoblade was in for it now. Tommy couldn't help but grin.

Don't get him wrong, he was still absolutely pissed at Wilbur, and he hated him and his stupid, bitch face, and he was a liar and a traitor and he never wanted to talk to him again, but...he didn't like Technoblade all that much either. It wouldn't hurt to listen in as he got his ass handed to him.

"Wha--No--" Wilbur sputtered, and Tommy could almost imagine his sharp swivel towards the other man, how his eyes would burn with indignant rage. "You had just as much to do with it as I did! I tried to pull him out--and we both saw the warrants. We *both* brushed those off, we *both* said it wasn't possible."

Technoblade sighed. "Denial's not a good look on you Wilbur. You and I both know--"

The voices abruptly became hushed, just enough that he couldn't make out the words, and Tommy knew it was time to go. Technoblade had not, in fact, gotten his ass handed to him, which meant there was no point wasting any more time on their boring-ass conversation, not when he could be escaping.

He took a quiet step away from the door and a sudden hiss filled the air.

Light hit his face. Tommy froze. Looked up.

A broad silhouette and two red eyes peered back down at him.

Tommy considered fighting against Technoblade for one brief moment before reality hit. He was weaponless and injured. He could barely move his left arm, a single deep breath sent stabs of pain through his chest, his head throbbed with every footstep. And then there was the bullet wound.

The man dragged him back to his room with little difficulty.

There was no point in a struggle, not against Technoblade. He needed to bide his time, conserve his energy, and watch their behavior if he wanted to ever escape them. Stay alert and look for an opportunity. He couldn't let them be the ones to strike first.

They were *the* Antarctic gang. They wouldn't go easy on him. Once they decided to get rid of him their attack would be sudden and merciless. He needed to be out by then. Or, at the very least, he couldn't let them catch him off guard.

That night, Tommy didn't sleep. He just sat on the edge of his bed, staring at his door, waiting for them to come back and punish or beat or kill him. No one ever came, but that didn't matter. They would eventually. So Tommy wouldn't sleep. He wouldn't make it that easy for them.

The next day the door was locked.

Technoblade appeared at Tommy's door precisely twenty seven seconds after the lights flickered on the next morning. Tommy stared at him with narrowed eyes.

The man stared back. He was wearing a cape again today, Tommy noticed. Black and lightweight this time, so it wouldn't get in his way when he tried to fucking murder Tommy.

Seemed he would have less time to escape than he thought. There weren't many other reasons for Technoblade to show up at his door, were there?

"This it, then?" he growled at the man from where he sat on the bed, curled up against the wall, "Decided I'm too much trouble to keep around?"

The door slid open. Fuck. Okay. So this was happening now. He'd assumed he'd have more time to plan when they didn't come for him in the night. Apparently not.

That was fine. Perfectly fine. So his schedule had been moved up a little. Fine. He just needed to buy himself a little longer to figure out his plan.

What could he do here? Intimidation, maybe? Make a few threats, hope that Technoblade hesitated before dragging him to his death? He didn't have much else to work with, not when he was injured and utterly helpless.

"Well you'll have to take me by force." he snapped, clenching his fists in a false show of bravery, "Don't even think about coming any fucking closer. I'll bite your fingers off."

Technoblade stared at him for a long moment. Tommy bared his teeth.

The man rolled his eyes. Turned away.

"Come on. " he grunted, and then he disappeared from the doorway, footsteps receding down the hall.

Tommy stared at the spot he had stood.

What? He had just left him there. Unguarded. Why would he--? What? What the fuck was his game here?

The footsteps returned. Technoblade poked his head into the doorway. "You coming?"

Tommy's entire body went tense. He didn't move.

Technoblade just sighed, running a hand through his long hair, glancing up at the ceiling.

"Of course, I had to be the one stuck guarding him, even though he's not even my..." he muttered to himself, and then his eyes locked back on Tommy, "Look kid. If I wanted to kill you, I would have done it already, okay? Let's go."

He vanished from the doorway with one last swirl of his cape.

And Tommy...for some reason Tommy didn't think he was lying. Because Technoblade had just said the first thing that made actual sense since Tommy had woken up in the gang's base. Tommy was weak. Technoblade could just drag him down the hallway kicking and screaming if he wanted to. Lying was unnecessary.

So Tommy followed.

Technoblade didn't react when Tommy caught up with him, but Tommy could've sworn his broad shoulders relaxed just the slightest bit.

But maybe that was just his imagination. The man didn't even glance at him as they walked, leading him through the maze of hallways until he stopped at a door that Tommy actually recognized. The kitchen. The door hissed open. Technoblade blocked the rest of the hallway, gesturing for Tommy to enter.

He stepped inside.

His eyes landed on Philza first. Sitting at their kitchen table, wingless and dressed in a casual green robe, chattering idly with the man on his left. He glanced up as the door to the kitchen hissed open, his face splitting into a casual grin as his eyes landed on Tommy. "Hey there. Come and eat."

What...the fuck? What was happening?

Tommy's eyes flashed to Wilbur, sitting at Philza's left, staring down at a plate of food like his life depended on it. He seemed intent on ignoring that he existed and Tommy...

Tommy was confused. This was weird, right? Like, completely weird. Wilbur wouldn't look at him, Technoblade was hovering at his back, and Philza just kept staring at him with that freaky *smile*. It was *weird*. People didn't fucking do that.

Tommy's eyes left the two of them, surveying the rest of the room.

There was a third space on the right side of Philza, same as before, clearly meant for Technoblade, but then...

There was a fourth chair at the table. Tommy stared at it.

Technoblade nudged him forward. "Sit."

Tommy sat. Not much else he could do surrounded by the three most dangerous men in the city, was there?

There was a plate of food at his seat, a steaming dish of something yellow and fluffy and a hunk of warm bread, smeared with melting butter. It looked delicious. It smelled like heaven.

Tommy stared down at it skeptically. He hadn't eaten in so long, but...nothing that good came for free. There was a catch here somewhere, a price to be paid. He just didn't know what it was.

Or maybe this was all part of their trap. The food could have anything in it, poison or a drug or...he didn't know, *something*. It was too fucking good to be true.

He picked up his fork, poking at it suspiciously. It wobbled on the plate.

"You can eat." A voice said from across the table and Tommy glanced up to see Philza, head tilted and eyes a little confused.

Tommy stared at him for one, long moment. Philza held his gaze with one of his usual half-smiles. Wilbur watched it go down out of the corner of his eye. Technoblade's fist tightened around his kitchen knife.

Tommy looked back down at his plate. "I'm not hungry."

It was a stone cold lie.

Technoblade escorted him back to his room.

Hours later, Technoblade showed up at his door again, cape and all, and Tommy realized who was going to be permanently handling him. Wilbur hated him, refused to even look at him, Philza had better things to do. So he was stuck with Technoblade as his new guard dog. The only member of the gang he had absolutely no chance against physically. Great.

Technoblade led him back to the kitchen. For dinner. Because apparently that was also a thing now. They were trying to feed the random thief they picked up off the streets *dinner*. Since that made so much sense and didn't raise any red flags at all.

He was still trying to figure out their game when they arrived at the kitchen.

This time it was a bowl of soup.

Tommy glared at it. Fuck them and their food and its stupid delicious scent. He wasn't eating. They wouldn't break him.

Philza cleared his throat. Tommy glanced up at him.

“Mate, you really should eat something.” Philza frowned at his untouched plate.

“It’s not healthy.” Wilbur added on from his left. Like a bitch. He had been ignoring Tommy for the last fucking day and hating him for weeks longer than that, who was he to tell him what he should do? Liar. Traitor. Dick.

Tommy's hand tightened around his fork. He weighed the pros and cons of stabbing Wilbur in the neck. “Like you care. Go back to ignoring I exist.”

Wilbur sucked in a sharp breath and went back to staring at his plate. Philza's frown deepened.

“Your body needs energy to heal. You must be hungry. Eat.”

Tommy slapped his palm against the table. “Will you just fucking give it up, already? As if I'd give you lot another opportunity to drug me or bribe me or whatever other sick shit. I’ll pass. I’ve gone much longer without food before, so you can fuck right off. Your games won’t work, not on me.”

Three pairs of eyes shot to him. None of them looked particularly happy.

“What?” Tommy hissed, eyes darting between them, “Why the fuck are you looking at me like that?”

Nobody answered. Technoblade led him back to his room.

That night, he went for escape attempt number two. His door had a tiny electric panel on one side of the wall. That was his target.

He had no fucking idea how to use it. All that showed up on the screen was a bunch of strange symbols. Some kind of password, he figured. No way he was going to be able to crack that.

So he just smashed his chair into it until the screen shattered and tendrils of smoke started to drift from the wreckage. The door slid open with a hiss.

Long story short, Technoblade found him. Again. It may or may not have been because he tripped in the dark of the hallway and shrieked when he landed on his bad arm.

Not important. Didn’t need to linger on that. The past was the past and all.

What was more important was that not an hour after his escape began he was back in his room, back to staring at his wall in the dark. There was a solid metal box over the electric panel for the door.

He didn't sleep again that night, sure that they would appear in the darkness to take him away. No one came, but still. He watched.

They would come for him eventually. He’d be ready.

Technoblade showed up at his door the next morning precisely twenty seven seconds after the lights flicked back on, a new, gray cape swooshing behind him, and Tommy took it as a sign that this whole 'breakfast' shit

was going to be a regular thing.

Sure enough, Technoblade led him to the kitchen. Philza and Wilbur were waiting for them there when they arrived.

Philza smiled at him as Tommy collapsed into his chair, though it had more of an edge to it than usual. “Hey mate, you look...”

His eyes scanned him, from the bruises under his eyes to his matted hair to the awkward way he held his arm, and the gentle smile turned into a wince as he searched for a word.

“He looks like shit.” Technoblade cut in.

“Techno!” Philza swatted his head.

“What?” Technoblade shrugged. “It’s true. You know it, I know it.”

He turned to Tommy. “You look like shit.”

Tommy stared at him for a moment. Blinked.

“Thanks.” At least he was honest. Told it like it was. Tommy could respect that.

He went back to staring at the table. He didn't have the energy to do much else.

They ate breakfast exactly like the day before. Philza tried to get him to talk. Wilbur ignored him. Technoblade watched him watch a spot on the table.

He didn't eat. Obviously. It was almost less a matter of cautiousness than of principle at that point--he was so hungry that his food could have been doused in Glow for all he cared, but if he gave in and accepted a meal...well then the gang would win, wouldn't they? They would know they had broken him, and that would be so much worse than the hollow pain in his stomach. So Tommy didn't eat.

He spent the rest of the afternoon flipping off imaginary versions of each member of the gang, pondering where he could stab them to cause the most damage, until even that lost its satisfaction. And then he just sat on his bed. And stared at the wall. Tried not to fall asleep. Half-heartedly plotted his next escape.

He wasn't sure if it was the boredom or the hunger that would kill him first.

Philza tried a new strategy at dinner that night.

“So. Theseus.” he started, “You clearly aren’t interested in answering our questions.”

“Yep.” Tommy didn’t even bother looking up at the man. He’d already heard all their weak attempts at getting information out of him. This wasn't exactly anything new.

And he...he was fucking tired okay? Tired of their bullshit, tired of constantly being on high alert, tired of the pain in his arms and his stomach and his head. And, you know. Also just tired. From not sleeping.

He'd gotten so desperate for it, almost delirious from the fog in his brain, that he'd started to resort to cat naps at odd hours of the day, slipping under the spell of sleep for fifteen, maybe twenty minutes at a time until instinct took hold and he jolted back awake, head whipping back and forth, heart pounding against his chest. It wasn't enough, it was never enough, but he hadn't collapsed yet so. That was something, he supposed.

He'd be fine though. This was the better of two evils. If the gang came for him and he was asleep he'd be dead in an instant. So it was fine. He could manage until he got out of their stupid, fucking unending base and away from Wilbur's stupid face and Technoblade's stupid capes and Philza's stupid, fake sm--.

Philza. He was talking again. Right. Focus.

--ave an offer." An offer?

Well. Actually. Now that...

He could work with that. Right? Bargain for his freedom?

Tommy forced his head up to meet Philza's gaze. It took much more effort than it should have. "I'm listening."

Triumph danced in Philza's blue eyes. "A game of sorts. A question for a question."

That didn't sound like a game at all. That sounded more like an interrogation strategy, actually. But hey, if he was actually going to get something out of their interactions for once, then fuck it. He'd bite.

"I go first." Tommy mumbled. He was way too tired to deal with getting scammed out of information. Not today, thank you very much. If they were doing this, they'd do it his way.

"Wouldn't suggest anything less."

Tommy didn't like the look on his face. It looked too victorious. Like he'd won something important. And if he'd won, that meant Tommy had lost. And Tommy hated losing. It almost made him want to change his mind, just to spite him.

But no. He wouldn't. He needed information.

"Fine." he grunted, "When can I leave?"

Philza tilted his head. Smiled. It felt like a trap. "You're free to leave whenever you'd like, Theseus. As soon as you're all healed up."

Tommy frowned. "I'm not going to play if you're going to lie."

Philza went quiet.

They spent the rest of their dinner in silence.

Rinse. Repeat.

The lights flickered on. Technoblade took him to breakfast.

Philza tried to talk with him. Tommy ignored him. Wilbur wouldn't meet his gaze.

Tommy wouldn't eat.

Technoblade brought him back to his room. Tommy alternated between staring blankly at the walls and staring blankly at the floor. His stomach felt like it was trying to eat him from the inside out. His arm and head pulsed with pain. He fought against the pull of sleep.

Technoblade arrived. They went to dinner. Philza made more futile attempts. Tommy stared at the table. He pretended not to notice the glances Philza and Wilbur exchanged when they thought he wasn't looking.

Technoblade watched.

Tommy wouldn't eat.

Technoblade brought him back. The lights flickered off.

And then Tommy tried to escape.

On day three he found the camera's blindspot, sitting there until Technoblade burst into the room and then dashing out the open door behind him. He couldn't have gone more than twenty feet before the man caught up with him.

On day four he slipped a kitchen knife in his pocket at breakfast and jammed it in the door as Technoblade left that night. When he pried it open an hour later the man was already waiting outside his room with his arms crossed, shaking his head. Tommy clearly hadn't been as stealthy as he thought.

On day five Tommy glanced away from where he was struggling to climb into a wall vent with only one arm and saw two blood red eyes peering at him from the dark. Startled, desperate, and more than a little sleep deprived, he lost his balance, and the next thing he knew he was in Technoblade's arms. The man stared down at him for a long moment.

Tommy glared back at him.

"That's enough."

That couldn't be good.

Technoblade took them to a massive library. With books.

Floor to ceiling, wall to wall. Fucking *books*. Tall and short and thick and thin, some faded and others good as new. The air smelled of leather and paper and lost history. The bookshelves spiraled farther than he could see, twisting out of his view.

Tommy didn't think he'd seen so many. Not ever. He couldn't help but stare.

In the center of the room sat three massive, dark armchairs and one wide, heavy desk. Technoblade dropped him from his arms in the center of the furniture and tapped once on his shoulder.

"Sit." he said.

Tommy sat. His body sunk into the massive, soft cushions.

He barely even noticed. His eyes just kept flickering around the room, from the dark, towering bookshelves, to the silver lanterns that cast the room in a soft light, to the thick wooden columns supporting the ceiling, and then back to the books. The fucking *books*.

"Kid, just tell me this," Technoblade said, and Tommy's gaze shot back to him. He leaned against the desk, peering at him. "You have anywhere better to go? Any family, any friends out there who will take you in if we let you go?"

And that...*that* hit hard. The awe of seeing the library vanished. His shoulders hunched.

Because he didn't. Sam and Skeppy hated him. Quackity had more important business to attend to. Purpled was barely older than him. And it wasn't like his parents were an option.

He had nobody. Tommy Innett, utterly alone, just like it always had been. Just like it always would be. So the answer was no. He didn't have anywhere better to go.

He didn't say that though. He didn't say anything at all. Just sunk further into the couch, hugging himself with his arms.

He may have been alone out there, but at least he was alive. Free.

Technoblade turned away with a sigh. "You remind me of myself."

As if that wasn't cryptic as fuck. He reminded him of himself? What the fuck was that supposed to mean?

The man had moved on from it though, settling himself into a massive, dark armchair behind his desk.

"Let's play the question game." he said abruptly.

Tommy's face twisted. "I already fuckin' did this with Philza, I don' need to do it again."

"For real this time." the man promised, "No lies. No tricks. A question for a question. Truth for truth."

Tommy stared at him for a long moment, considering.

Technoblade...out of all of them, he was the only one who hadn't lied to him yet. Wilbur twisted his words into daggers, Philza hid lies behind smiles, but Technoblade...at least he was straight with Tommy.

It was worth a shot. He could always stop talking if he thought the man was trying to trick him.

"Fine. Okay."

For a second Technoblade looked back at him, watching as he curled up tighter into the deep couch, his good arm curled against his stomach, his head resting against the side of it. Something in his eyes softened, just a little.

He nodded. Tommy took it as his sign to start.

"Philza was lying. I was never going to be healed enough to leave." It wasn't a question, not really. They both knew the answer. The only question was whether Technoblade would admit it.

Without hesitation, Technoblade nodded. "Yes."

He sighed. "Look, kid, to be perfectly honest, we don't trust you. We hardly even know you. You've seen our faces, our base, heard our voices. No matter the reason we went to retrieve you in the first place, no matter whatever other reasons we might want you to stay here, we just can't let you go back right now."

Holy shit.

He'd done it. Told him the truth. No twisting his words to make it look better, no polishing it, just the cold hard truth.

As Tommy's brain tried to process it all, Technoblade leaned over and pulled something from his desk, and Tommy's eyes shifted to watch the movement--

A long, wickedly sharp silver blade. That was what he had just pulled out. And then a whetstone. And then he proceeded to start *sharpening it*. Tommy went still.

"What's your favorite color?" Technoblade asked without looking up.

"My--what?" Tommy's gaze was still locked on the knife. Holy shit, that blade was big. Prime, that thing could fucking *skewer* him, he wasn't--

"Your favorite color." Technoblade repeated. Casually. Nonchalantly. As if that wasn't the stupidest question ever. As if he wasn't sharpening a knife. The dagger scraped against the whetstone.

The question finally sunk in.

That was it. That was his turn. His one question, the only question where he was guaranteed the truth.

It was dumb, but Tommy felt like he needed to like, help him out here or something. The man was clearly confused. "You get that this is your question right? I'm not giving you extras. You don't wanna ask about my name or Theseus or--"

"We'll get there." The steel blade sparked against the stone.

Fine. He could have it his way then.

Tommy shifted on the couch, crossing his good arm over the other, and he sunk further into the cushions...and holy *shit* the couch really was comfortable. They had to have made it from clouds or some shit, because fucking *Prime*--

"Your favorite color." Technoblade interrupted. Right. Question game. He pulled his attention back to the man.

He still seemed utterly unbothered with it all, still just sharpening his dagger, not even remotely annoyed at him for spacing out, and no matter which way Tommy looked at it he couldn't figure out how the question could be used against him.

For once it was just a harmless, innocent question. Tommy couldn't remember the last time that had happened. And the last time he'd been asked his favorite color...fucking *never*.

"Fine." Tommy muttered, "Red."

"Dark red? Light?"

Tommy wasn't sure what it was that made him smile at that. Maybe the real curiosity in Technoblade's voice. Maybe the sleep deprivation. Maybe just the absurdity of it all. Whatever it was, he couldn't help it when his lips twisted up into a soft grin. The first he'd had in a while.

"That's not the game, is it Technoblade?" he murmured with a small, crooked smile, "One question a go."

The edge of the man's lip twitched. Just a little. His eyes sparkled. "Very well. Your turn."

Just as quickly as it had come, the smile was gone. Back to business. Technoblade might have given up his chance for a truth, but Tommy sure as hell wouldn't.

"When can I leave?" he asked.

Technoblade nodded, like he'd been expecting the question. "I'll let you go tomorrow morning if you wish. Just say the word."

Tommy raised his eyebrows. "Philza and Wilbur won't like that."

"Yes, but their opinions on the matter aren't in question." The dagger struck the whetstone again. "It's your choice. If you choose to go--" Another strike. "I'll escort you out myself. Of course, this is all on the express condition that you keep quiet about the finer details of our organization. If not..."

Technoblade's red eyes bored into his. The blade struck the stone with force. "I'll come and handle you myself. So I'd advise you kept your mouth shut. But regardless, yes, you'll be free to leave."

Bullshit. Part of him wanted to call the man out. What he was saying...it was insane. He was promising an impossibility, promising that he would go against his two other partners and for what? For *him*? It sounded like bullshit.

The other part of him, the larger part, believed him. Tommy wasn't quite sure why. Maybe because he still hadn't figured out a reason for the man to lie. Maybe he was just tired.

"Okay," he whispered. It wasn't an answer to the unspoken question of whether he'd stay, not even close. But it was enough. He'd wait and see. Think about it.

"Why Theseus?" Technoblade asked offhandedly.

Tommy jolted at the words. He'd been staring at the books again. "What?"

"Why Theseus?" he repeated, "Why that name?"

Another surprising question. Tommy wasn't sure what he was doing.

"My...my, uh..." His mouth clamped shut. *My parents*, he'd been about to tell the man. He'd heard it from his parents, back when they tucked him in every night with a story, singing him to sleep. He really needed to get some rest, before he started spilling his entire life story. His family wasn't something he exactly liked to discuss, and it'd do no good to have his backstory aired out to the entire criminal underground. If anything, it would only make them pity him more.

"I heard it in a story once," he settled on, "I don't know which. It was a long time ago."

It was as close to the truth as he could get, purposefully vague. Technoblade didn't seem to mind. He glanced up from his knife. "Theseus and the Minotaur."

Tommy blinked at him. "What?"

"That's where it's from. Greek mythology." His red eyes were unreadable.

"Oh." Tommy said, "Yeah."

He paused.

"I don't quite remember," he confessed. Technoblade's gaze sunk back down to his dagger. He resumed sharpening it.

"I have a book of it, somewhere in the back. I can get it for you if you'd like." The offer was casual, easy. Like he hadn't just offered to give *Tommy* one of the few remaining books in the city.

Tommy stared at him. Again.

Technoblade didn't seem to mind his silence. He just kept sharpening his knife, not saying a word.

It was nice. Quiet. It had never been quiet in East Side. There was always some sort of bustle--the shouts of market stalls advertising their meager wares, or the deep, metallic whirring of patrol drones as they passed by, or the deafening noise of the crowd. The steady rhythm of boots marching against the crooked cobblestone. The clinking of Prime cards being exchanged. Screaming, more often than not. There was a lot of screaming.

Tommy made up his mind.

"I'll stay." He whispered, "Just for a little while. Not--not because you want me to. I could leave if I really wanted to. But I won't. Just...because."

Technoblade didn't even flinch. "If that's what you want."

And that was it. No fake, smug smile, no pretense of celebration, no holding the victory over his head. That was it. The tension eased out of Tommy's shoulders.

Technoblade, he decided, was his favorite.

"What do you do? For the gang." Tommy asked.

The knife *zhinged* against the whetstone. "I handle the children who ask too many questions."

Tommy's eyes went wide.

Technoblade glanced up at his silence, catching sight of his expression. The edge of his mouth twitched up again. "A joke, Theseus. That was a joke."

Tommy was only slightly reassured.

He put the first knife to the side, picking up a second one from somewhere behind his desk. Fucking Prime, how many of those things did he *have* back there? "I plan and I research. The fighting is only occasional. And not with children. We don't deal with children."

"You *didn't* deal with children." Tommy corrected, quirking a wry, tired half-smile at the man, "Past tense. Now you have me."

Technoblade tilted his head, considering it. "I suppose."

He hesitated, just for a moment, and Tommy's heart sunk. He had a sneaking suspicion he knew what the man's next question was.

And then, right on cue, he asked it. "What's your name?"

He'd known it was coming, but the question still knocked him off balance. That...that question was a little harder, wasn't it? Nobody knew that there was a connection between street kid Tommy and Underground Theseus.

Nobody except Dream, that was. And that hadn't exactly gone over well for him, had it?

So he wasn't looking forward to telling fucking *Technoblade*. But he sort of felt like he had to.

Technoblade had held up his end of the deal. It was only fair that he reciprocated.

And it wasn't like the gang would be able to find any dirt on him. He knew he wouldn't show up in any records or anything. Even if he gave them his last name, which he wasn't planning on, they wouldn't find him among any records of the living in the city. They'd have to search far deeper than that.

He took a deep breath. Exhaled. "Tommy."

"Tommy." Technoblade repeated softly, testing the name on his tongue. He set the second dagger down on his desk, pushing back from his chair and casually leaning against his desk. "One more round, then?"

Tommy stifled a yawn. Shuffled deeper into the couch. It really was soft. "What's with the hair? The pink? And your eyes."

Probably not the best use of his last question, but he couldn't help but ask. He would just blame it on the sleep deprivation or some shit.

"My eyes got enhancements a decade ago. And my hair..." He sighed, running a hand through it, looking at the bubblegum strands, "Normally it's brown. Wilbur just thought it would be *hilarious* for the big bad Technoblade to charge into fights with a bright pink target on his head. Trust me, I plan on getting rid of it as soon as physically possible. It's horrendous."

"I--" Tommy yawned again. His eyelashes fluttered. "Gives you a real intimidating aura. Though, prob'ly not the best for anything undercover. I like it."

His head lolled against the arm of the couch. He blinked. Once. Twice. His arm fell from across his chest.

Something warm and soft and heavy settled across his chest.

"Go to sleep, Theseus." A voice whispered from somewhere far away. "Sleep."

Tommy's eyes slid shut.

Chapter End Notes

bedrock bros :))

you're safe from my cliffhangers for now, but don't get your hopes up.

thanks again for reading and for all the comments! love you all <3

next chapter will be out by friday

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

bonding

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy woke up warm and safe and comfortable, and that was how he knew something was wrong. His eyes snapped open.

He wasn't in his house, that much was clear. This wasn't the white room either, no, because this room had high, dark ceilings and thick wooden columns and towering bookcases--

The previous night came rushing back to him.

He sat up abruptly, pushing the blanket--no, wait, that was a cape--off his chest, swinging his legs over the side of the couch and looking around.

Technoblade wasn't there. The room was empty.

The room was *empty*. No one was there. No one was watching him.

He could escape. They probably wouldn't know he was gone for hours.

For just a moment, he considered it. His eyes drifted to the door of the room and lingered there. He could do it. Despite everything, he could escape.

Tommy didn't move.

Look. He didn't trust Technoblade as far as he could throw him, Wilbur and Philza even less than that.

But, at least for now, he was fairly sure that he was temporarily safe with them. Technoblade had made a good point--what reason did they have to lie when he was so weak and defenseless? Sure, there was still the possibility that this was all part of some long, convoluted mind game, but if that was the case, why would Technoblade tell him Philza had lied?

And, as much as Tommy was stubborn, he wasn't so stubborn as to be stupid. He was injured--if he was released on the streets in his current state, he'd be a goner. Here, there was shelter. Here, there was warmth. Here, he would actually get solid, filling meals instead of whatever scraps he could scavenge. So even though he didn't trust them and he didn't like them, for now he could accept a truce was a necessary evil. He'd stay, just long enough that he'd be ready for action once he got back on the streets.

A shiver ran down his spine and Tommy grabbed the thin gray cape that had been draped across him like a blanket, slinging it around his shoulders. He was pretty sure it was Technoblade's, but hey, if he didn't want people wearing his capes, maybe he shouldn't just leave them lying around. Tommy was cold and the cape was warm. Case closed.

He had to admit, he could see why Technoblade liked them so much. There was a certain power to the cape, a sense of importance that came with it. He couldn't help but do a quick spin around in it for a second,

feeling the whoosh of it twirling behind him, and as he did his eyes caught on something next to his armchair.

A book sat on his bedside table, thick and leather-bound, pages old and worn and wise. The cover was inscribed in gold with the title *The Mythology of Ancient Greece*, and Tommy couldn't help the small smile that formed on his face. It seemed Technoblade had kept good on his promise to get him that mythology book.

On the cover sat a small, folded note. Tommy opened it.

Take the second left and the third right. We'll be waiting in the kitchen. -Technoblade

Right on cue, his stomach growled. He remembered that he hadn't eaten in like five days.

Tommy padded out of the room, the gray cape fluttering behind him.

Tommy hesitated outside the kitchen door. He could hear muffled voices through the glass and he couldn't help but be the slightest bit worried about it. Technoblade was fine for the most part, but Wilbur and Philza...what was he supposed to do with all of them in there, just waiting for him? How much had Technoblade told them? How much did they know?

He leaned closer, trying to make out the voices more clearly and the kitchen door hissed open. Three pairs of eyes shot up to him. Tommy froze.

No more time to plan. They were all sitting there at the table, watching him, so unless he just ran back out the door there was no getting around them.

So how was he going to play this? He could keep ignoring them, keep his cards close to his chest, but...if he was going to stay with them it would probably be better not to burn bridges right? To play nice, just for now?

He could at least give it a try. Maybe it'd win him some favors.

"Hello Philza." Tommy nodded a greeting in his direction and Philza's jaw dropped.

Oh. Guess Technoblade hadn't told them anything after all, just waited for him to break the news. It made Tommy like him even more, and he turned toward him next.

"Technoblade." Tommy greeted with another nod. The man's eyes were locked around the cape settled around his shoulders. He only acknowledged the greeting with a faint nod.

Maybe he was a little more territorial about the cape stuff than Tommy had thought. He was still staring at the gray silk draped across his shoulders, after all. Whatever. He'd handle that later. There was still one member of the gang he hadn't greeted yet.

His expression twisted as he faced him. "Wilbur."

He was proud the greeting sounded only slightly more bitter than the others.

Wilbur looked like he'd seen a ghost. All three of them were still staring at him. Why the hell were they looking at him like that? Prime, this was awkward. What were they waiting for? Should he sit down or just keep standing there awkwardly? Sit down, right?

Tommy, to be perfectly honest, had never been the best with social situations. He was used to planning. Identifying every possible obstacle that could occur during a mission and then determining the best course

of action to address it--and rarely was *talking* that best course of action. Tommy preferred to rely on much more efficient, reliable means of handling any issues that arose i.e. his staff. This he was good at--predicting when his opponent would swing, detecting when they were off balance, anticipating their actions and reactions. The art of conversation was a much more...gray sort of skill. People's minds were not predictable in the same way that their fists were, and there was a much greater range of motivations behind words than there ever was behind violence. It was impossible to map out all the possibilities. It was like every remark was a test, and he needed to choose the proper response to pass. Annoying, tiresome, and unbelievably stressful, in short. If conversation was a test then more often than not, he failed.

It had been one of his parent's greatest failures--tutor after tutor had attempted to fix him for social events, and time after time again they had been unsuccessful. Despite their efforts, Tommy detested small talk, and he was even worse with formalities. It had caused a great deal of issues over the years. At some point, he'd just given up. People would remain a mystery to him, so be it. He didn't much care and he didn't much need to: that was the beauty of working alone.

Or it had been, he supposed. Now, trapped in a base with three near strangers, he supposed he'd have to actually try to be sociable again. He fumbled with his chair, pulling it out from the table and awkwardly settling into it. Everyone was still just looking at him. Tommy's brows furrowed.

"Good morning...?" He tried uncertainly.

That, at least, seemed to snap Technoblade out of it. He went back to eating and not staring at him.

Wilbur and Philza, not so much. He was pretty sure he had sent them into a state of permanent shock. Fried their brains or some shit.

"Evening, actually." Technoblade said after a second delay, "You were out all day."

Damn. That was like twenty hours. Maybe that whole not sleeping thing hadn't been such a good idea after all.

His stomach growled again and Tommy glanced down at his plate, filled with something warm, yellow, and fluffy. It smelled delicious. Like heaven. But...Tommy still couldn't quite bring himself to trust it quite yet.

"Technoblade, can I--?" Tommy held his plate out toward him and with a single glance the man understood. He traded plates without a word.

Tommy felt significantly better about eating after that. Though that may have mostly been because, dear Prime, he was hungry. So he totally would have just started eating if he didn't still feel the eyes burning into the top of his head, watching him.

Oh, blast it. Forget friendly conversation. This was why he detested proper society in the first place. He would be his regular, unsociable self and they'd just have to deal with it.

"Can you stop fucking staring at me?" He snapped, stabbing his fork into a piece of food and glaring at them, "I'm trying to eat."

Philza's gaze fell back down to his plate. Wilbur's, on the other hand, shot toward Technoblade. "You broke him."

Tommy ignored the accusation and the way Wilbur's voice had turned to acid, ignored the way it stung just a little bit. Wilbur despised him, he got it. He was a security risk, he understood. He didn't need to listen to the man talk shit about him too.

Technoblade was unphased by the outburst. If anything, he looked a little bit irritated. "No?"

“Yes you did.” Wilbur hissed at him, a hand gesturing wildly at Tommy, “Look at him, sitting and talking and fucking eating, what the fuck did you do, Technoblade? Did you torture him? Oh Prime, you terrified him didn’t you, I swear I’m going to--”

Uh. What? Torture? Was that...an option?

“I just talked to him. Like he was a partner and not a prisoner.” Technoblade gave him a look. “You know, like a normal person. You should try it sometime.”

Wilbur scowled. “Techno, I swear *if you hurt him --*”

“Boys,” Philza started, looking between them and then over to Tommy, who was trying very hard to pretend that he didn’t exist. Wilbur’s glare turned on Philza, and he opened his mouth to retort--

And that was the instant Tommy decided he was just going to ignore the argument entirely. Maybe if he just kept quiet, they’d leave him out of it. Wilbur looked like he was about to stab his kitchen knife into Technoblade’s jugular, and Technoblade was clenching his fork so tightly Tommy thought it might snap in half, and he did not want to get in between that. He’d just let this play out.

Wilbur was yelling at Philza now, something along the lines of *Technoblade? You think fucking Technoblade managed to coax the kid out of his shell without force?* and Tommy realized that he was going to be there for a while.

He picked up his fork again. Might as well finally eat if he was going to have to wait. He shoved a bite of the food into his mouth and--

His eyes lit up. Oh Prime. Maybe he *had* died.

“Holy shit. Is this laced with fuckin’ Glow or shit or--” Tommy shoveled another forkful into his mouth, vaguely noticing the men had stopped arguing at the sound of his voice, “Technoblade, what the fuck is this?”

Technoblade glanced over at him, the tension relaxing from his shoulders just the slightest bit. “An omelet.”

“Omelet.” Tommy paused eating just long enough to repeat it, looking at the plate like it was Prime himself.

Wilbur was silent.

“Theseus, you’re really alright?” Philza asked carefully.

Tommy nodded. “Yeah. I’m good. I’m gonna stay for now.”

He paused. “It’s Tommy. By the way.”

Wilbur looked like he was about to have an aneurysm. Tommy pushed himself out of his chair. “Technoblade?”

The man stood. “Let’s go. I’ll show you your room.”

“So?” Technoblade asked, hovering behind his shoulder.

The man had led him away from the kitchen to what he said was Tommy’s new living quarters, an upgrade from the empty room they had put him in before. It was surprisingly close to the kitchen: they had only

walked for a minute or two away when Technoblade had stopped, typing a passcode into the glass screen next to the door. It slid open to his new room.

It was...well, truth be told, it was ugly. Like, obnoxiously ugly.

Now, don't get him wrong, it was definitely an improvement. It had to be at least four times as big as the entirety of his old house, and it had actual furniture. He wouldn't go back for the world.

But it was *ugly* ugly. Like, it hurt his eyes to look at.

Though that was mainly because every single surface, every single piece of furniture, was covered in some variety of fucking red.

The walls. The blankets. The carpets on the wood floor. The accents of the dark, wooden furniture. Bright red, dark red, neon red. The color scheme was appalling. It sort of looked like someone had committed a massacre and then proceeded to smear the blood of their victims across every single surface of the room.

And it clearly had been chosen with him in mind. He had wondered why Technoblade had asked him his favorite color. Clearly, this was why.

A glance over his shoulder showed him Technoblade was still hovering there, valiantly trying to pretend that he wasn't watching Tommy and waiting for his response.

And that was when Tommy made the decision to, for once, just keep his mouth shut. Technoblade may have been built like a brick wall, but telling him that his carefully selected room design looked like someone had an accident with a woodchipper sort of felt like kicking a puppy. The man had obviously picked out the entire thing just for him. It was sort of sweet.

So he tried to smile at the man. "It's great. Very...unique."

Technoblade's chest puffed up, just a little bit. He hadn't seemed to catch the strain in Tommy's voice and Tommy could tell he was trying very hard not to look proud of his design. He led him inside and sat him on the bed, pulling out a thin piece of glass and metal.

"This is your holopad." Technoblade said, handing the piece of tech to Tommy, whose eyes had gone as wide as saucers, "I've put it in a restricted mode for now, but you'll have a map of the hallways and the passcode key for most rooms so you don't get stuck anywhere."

A holopad? Maybe moving on from the kidnapping thing was going to be easier than he thought if they kept giving him shit like a *holopad*. They were basically impossible to get anywhere in the Eastside, and even in black markets they cost a pretty penny, way more than Tommy had ever been able to afford. Only the wealthiest people in the city could buy them. And Technoblade was here, handing them out like candy.

Tommy stared at the holopad. "Just how rich are you people?"

Technoblade ignored him, swiping the screen to pull up the map and pointing at a room on it. "The kitchen is right here," he pointed to another room one hallway away, "and your room is over here. Phil, Wilbur, and I are in this wing right here."

"And this is for me?" Tommy asked with barely-concealed hope.

Technoblade nodded. Tommy grinned, jumping on the balls of his feet.

"Holy shit, this is so epic." he shouted, tilting the holopad one way and the other, swiping around on the screen "How many of these do you have in this place? What else can this thing do? Can I take one apart?"

"I'll think about it." The man promised and then his hand settled on Tommy's shoulder. "If you need anything, come find one of us in the east wing."

A pause. "And get some more rest, kid. You need it."

With that, he was gone.

Tommy spent the next morning exploring his new room. It was bigger than he'd originally thought, almost a little bit overwhelming, and the instant he realized that it also had a *bathroom*? He spent the entire rest of the morning taking the best shower of his life.

A few hours later, after the lights had flickered on and he was sure the kitchen would be totally empty, he snuck in and raided the pantry. He wasn't exactly looking forward to another meal with the gang, not after how horribly the last one had gone, but now that he had free reign of the base he wasn't really obligated to attend, was he?

He brought back enough food to last him at least a week, stashing it under his mattress, and it made him significantly less stressed about his new situation. It was always good to have a stash. If he was ever desperate enough to make a quick escape it would be helpful to have extra supplies.

He spent the rest of the day lounging in his room, and then the entire day after that, and the morning after he woke up with the grim realization that a week with the gang had come and gone and he was still holed up in a room, hiding away. And that--that just wouldn't stand. Tommy Innett was not a weakling. Tommy Innett was not a coward. So what was he still doing sitting there? He had a perfectly good pair of legs, a fucking map, and absolutely no one keeping an eye on him--he should get out there a bit. Explore a little. The base was a new frontier just waiting to be discovered.

It wasn't like there was anyone there to stop him.

Tommy found the armory within the first hour of exploring.

It was inevitable, honestly. He wasn't sure which of the idiots had thought leaving a scrappy seventeen year old--a known thief at that--alone and unsupervised in their top secret, weapon-packed underground base, but they were about to have a lot of regrets. With his newfound energy and the hallway map in his holopad he set out to systematically explore every nook and cranny of the place, because *of-fucking-course he was*. It was an underground base for Prime's sake. Now that he knew the gang wasn't planning on hurting him (yet), exploring it was too good of an opportunity to pass up.

He wasn't sure how kindly they would take to him snooping around their base, so he started in the west wing, as far as he could possibly get from their rooms.

And boy, had that been the right choice. Clearly the west wing was the superior of them all, because he'd found a *lot* of interesting rooms.

The first of which was an archery range, nearly fifty meters long and stocked with half a dozen composite bows. He'd tried fiddling around with one before he realized it was pointless--he couldn't do much of anything with only one good arm.

Next had been a room dedicated entirely to beautifully forged axes, with scuffed up human-shaped dummies against one wall. Tommy had given up on that one when he hadn't been able to lift even the smallest axe in the room. What the fuck were they making those with, solid gold?

He opened the next door to realize he had stumbled on Wilbur's anteater hate shrine again. He didn't even bother looking around that one, he just slowly backed away.

And it kept going from there, from a blacksmith room with a blast furnace and molds for different blades, to a closet filled entirely with different capes (*dear Prime, how many of those did Technoblade need?*), to what looked like a massive arena, complete with walls and other obstacles to take cover behind.

Which brought him to the armory. Even before he knew what was inside, he could tell that the room was going to be something good.

The door was locked, first of all—instant red flag. Only secrets were hidden behind locked doors. Not for long though. Technoblade had seen to that. Tommy pulled out his holopad.

The second hint that there may have been something interesting inside the room was the massive sign screaming DANGER in bright red capital letters, printed on the side of the door.

Subtle.

And entirely pointless. It did absolutely nothing to dissuade him from entering. If anything it only increased his curiosity. Danger? Sounded fun. He looked up the password to get inside.

With a few taps of his holopad the door slid open. Tommy's jaw dropped.

Whoa.

Tommy had never fired a gun before. Not a real one, at least. Sam had never had the resources or desire to buy one off the black market and even his inventions couldn't quite measure up with the precision of factory-made weapons.

Most of the time he didn't mind. He much preferred his staff or some knives--the stealthier, more reliable option--even if he had to compromise some of his long-range accuracy. He didn't mind, even if his hands itched to take all the metal apart and then assemble it all back together. Even if he sort of thought it would be pretty fucking cool to actually get to shoot something so accurate and powerful.

But actual guns were just too much of a rarity, given away only to guards and high-ranking officials. Tommy had come to terms with the fact that he'd never get to try one out.

Or so he'd thought. Until now.

To the point: the walls were covered with guns.

Assault rifles, pistols, a fucking RPG, you name it and the gang had it there. Their collection of revolvers and handguns were especially extensive, and Tommy couldn't help but wonder if that was Wilbur's doing. He had told Tommy before those were his favorite, after all. Maybe he spent his days in the armory polishing them and trying them out at the firing range--because of course, the right half of the room opened up from the armory into a massive gun range. Maybe he'd enter the room at any minute and run into Tommy snooping around.

Tommy wasn't sure whether he hoped for that possibility or dreaded it. Wilbur still hadn't spoken to him. Tommy had pretty much resigned himself to forever being hated by the man.

Which...when he thought about it...

If Wilbur already hated him, there wasn't really any harm in trying out his guns right? This was a once in a lifetime opportunity presenting itself, and he probably wouldn't even be caught. He hadn't seen any of the

three leaders at all that morning, and even if he was discovered playing around with a murder weapon, then worst come to worse they just despised him a little more. Oh well, right?

A shiny handgun caught his eye from across the room and Tommy reached up to grab it. He found a button on the side of the gun and pressed it, sending the magazine popping out. He checked the mag to see if it was loaded, and, surprisingly, two bullets were inside.

Nice.

He stepped up to the firing range, gun in hand, snapping the magazine back into place, pressing off what he was pretty sure was the safety.

How the fuck were you supposed to aim this thing? Maybe he should have chosen a gun with a scope or something, those seemed pretty straightforward. But the little one looked so cool, and it was light enough for him to lift with only his good arm...and it couldn't really be that hard, surely. Just point and shoot, right?

He hefted up the gun, pointing it downrange toward the target. His arm shook a little under the weight of it, the barrel wavering, but he figured that was probably normal. Surely the tiny movements wouldn't cause that much of a difference in the path of the bullet.

His eyes focused on the target. His finger hovered over the trigger.

This was happening. Holy shit. This was going to be so fucking epic.

He pulled the trigger.

The gun jerked in his hands, pulling back so suddenly and sharply that his grip on it faltered, and then the sound hit--a boom, like thunder in his head, then a sickening clang of metal on metal, so loud it left his ears ringing--and it was so unexpected, so startling that he jumped away from it, fully losing his grip on the gun. It clattered to the ground.

Well. That was...significantly harder than he had expected.

He took a shaky breath.

Prime, why hadn't anyone told him guns were so fucking loud up close? His ears were still ringing from the noise. No fucking wonder he'd been startled by it. Probably screwed up his aim too. He glanced up at the target, looking to see where he'd hit.

The target was completely unmarked. Tommy's eyebrows furrowed.

He hadn't hit it? What the fuck? He'd pointed the gun straight at the stupid target, where the fuck else could it have--

In that instant, a very loud, very unsettling creak, the creak of metal straining, of pressure building, came from somewhere in the ceiling.

Oh. Shit.

Turned out Tommy had been farther from hitting the target than he'd thought. A lot farther. Shooting-a-hole-in-the-ceiling amount farther.

And if that wasn't bad enough, he was pretty sure he had hit a pipe. Scratch that, he was very sure. Mostly because he was now frantically trying to figure out a way to stop the torrent of water that was rushing through the hole in the ceiling onto the firing range.

He stared up at it, panicking. Okay, this was bad. Like, really bad. But he could figure it out. Maybe. Probably. He just needed...some duct tape. Duct tape fixed everything, right? He could just climb up into the ceiling, a patch that pipe up, and it'd be good as new.

Though there was the issue of actually getting up there. And then of how he would actually patch it up with a jet of water shooting at his face...

Now that he thought about it, he'd probably need a ladder too. And some, like, protective gear. Did they have riot gear or something in the armory? Like a mask or shit?

Fuck, this was bad. Prime, how was he going to deal with this without the gang finding out? Surely they wouldn't notice--

"I knew I was going to regret giving you the passcodes." A voice grumbled from behind him.

Well. There went that plan.

He spun around to face the door, stepping in front of the giant spout of water gushing down onto the training room like he could hide the gaping hole in the ceiling.

Technoblade was unamused. He leaned against the doorbell with his arms crossed, watching it all go down.

"Heyyyy there Technoblade." Tommy said, grinning sheepishly, "Lovely morning, innit? What uh...what brings you to this side of the base?"

Technoblade looked at him. Looked at the water shooting from the ceiling. Looked back at him.

Tommy's grin became a wince. Yeah, that was fair. It had been a little dumb to think that no one else would notice the base was flooding.

Technoblade just sighed, shaking his head and running a hand through his hair, pulling out his holopad. "I'll call Phil. I should've known you'd need a babysitter."

Oh. Oh no he did not. That--that was too far. Tommy's eyes narrowed.

"A--A babysitter?" he sputtered, "What the fuck, I'm not a kid, Technoblade! I don't need someone around to watch me dickhead. I can handle myself just fine."

Of course, at that very instant, a loud, unnatural creak filled the room, followed by the sound of metal snapping, and the next thing he knew another spout of water shot out from the ceiling and nailed him in the back of his head, sending him sprawling onto his hands and knees.

He was back on his feet in an instant, pushing the wet hair out of his face, but it didn't matter. The damage had already been done. Technoblade's entire body was practically convulsing with the effort it took to restrain his laughter. It was the most emotion Tommy had seen him show yet.

And he hated it.

"I'm not a fucking kid." he repeated stubbornly, glaring at the man as water dripped down his face.

Technoblade glanced back up at the massive, gaping hole in the ceiling with barely-concealed mirth.

Tommy scowled. "Shut the hell up."

"I didn't say anything. Not a word."

“Yeah, but you were thinking it, weren’t you?” Tommy snapped, “Said it with your mind. Same fuckin’ thing.”

“That’s not--” Technoblade sighed, “You know what, sure. Now, come on.”

“What? But what about the,” Tommy tilted his head at the river of water rushing from their ceiling, “you know?”

“Philza will handle it.” Technoblade told him.

What, they were just going to leave it there without fixing it? Tommy felt a tad bit guilty about just leaving the wreckage there, especially since he was supposed to be trying to get on the gang’s good side. “I mean, I can wait--”

“The last thing Philza needs is a child in his way while he tries to stop our base from flooding, and he’s way too much of a pushover to kick you out himself. Let’s go.”

“Fine.” he muttered, “But I never said I was happy about it.”

Technoblade turned toward the door. Tommy trudged behind him. “Well I’m not happy about the bullet hole in my ceiling.”

Low fucking blow. It wasn’t like he had meant to break the firing range. “Fuck you. It was an accident.”

“You *accidentally* shot the ceiling.” The disbelief in Technoblade’s voice was palpable.

Tommy went red. “You fucking--yes, okay? It was just--the recoil, and I haven’t--I’m just not used to...”

Technoblade’s steps faltered, just for a second, before he picked back up the pace, and Tommy knew he understood. He must have assumed Tommy had experience with more weapons with all of his time in the Underground, but Tommy *hadn’t* fired a gun before. Of course he would screw it up.

“Oh.” he said. His voice was unreadable, his face just out of Tommy’s sight. “I see.”

“Yeah.” Tommy mumbled, his cheeks warm.

“I’m sure...” Technoblade began hesitantly, “If you asked Wilbur sometime, he’d be happy to teach you.”

“No.” Tommy hissed. That wasn’t even a possibility. He’d rather never shoot again than have Wilbur teach him. The man was more likely to shoot him than the targets. No fucking way.

Technoblade just kept talking. “That’s his thing, after all. I prefer a sword, myself, but Wilbur’s got his revolver--”

Clearly the man hadn’t heard him or something. What didn’t he get? He didn’t care if Wilbur was a gun *prodigy*, he just wasn’t an option.

“I’m not asking Wilbur.” he retorted, “That would be fuckin’ dumb. And even if I did ask him he wouldn’t fucking do it. He doesn’t like me.”

Technoblade was silent for a moment. “I think you’d be surprised.”

Tommy scoffed. “Sure.”

Technoblade stopped in front of him abruptly and Tommy jumped back at the sudden motion. A door in front of the man hissed open.

Tommy looked at him. “We’re back at the library again?”

Technoblade grabbed a book from one of the bookshelves and sat down in an armchair across from the one Tommy had slept in. "Sit. Read."

It was clear it wasn't a question, clear there wasn't a way out of it with Technoblade sitting there like a guard dog, so Tommy pulled open the greek mythology book and sat in his armchair. They read together for the rest of the afternoon until Technoblade got up to leave for dinner hours later, and then Tommy retreated back to his room, collapsing into his bed.

Tommy didn't know why, but the next day he came back. Technoblade was already there, settled into his armchair, a thick leather book open in his lap. He glanced up at Tommy as the door hissed open, sending him a single nod of greeting before going back to his book.

Tommy assumed that meant he was welcome. He curled up into his own chair across from the other man, flipping open his mythology book back to where he had left off, some story about a sop who couldn't stop staring at himself in a pond.

And there they sat as the hours went by, just reading away in silence, each of them to their own. Tommy liked it. He hadn't had much free time in Eastside, and when he did it was certainly not spent reading. Reading had been a skill and nothing more, the only thing his parents had given him that had actually helped him in the Underground, and that was only because most people in the slums were illiterate. There was just no need for the ordinary lower class citizen to bother with learning it, not when they were trying to survive, and Tommy had mostly felt the same way.

Reading recreationally was a new thing for him, a luxury he hadn't been afforded in Eastside. He figured he should enjoy it while he still could.

It was quiet with just the two of them there, peaceful. They didn't interrupt it, didn't even talk other than Tommy's occasional interjections, from *Icarus was an idiot* to *Hades seems like a bit of a wrongun' kidnapping women and all to holy shit, this Oedipus guy really fucked up*, to which Technoblade always responded with a wry glance his way and a quirk in his lips.

Later, when the words started to blur on the page and he had to reread the sentences five times for his brain to understand their meaning, he let his head droop and his eyes flutter and curled up into the warmth of the chair, drifting off to sleep.

He woke up the next morning tucked into his bed, draped in thick blankets.

Like a moth to flame he came back the next day and then the next, reading of Pandora and Prometheus, Hercules and Hera, watching as the Titans fell and the gods rose in their stead. Each night he fell asleep curled into the couch, and each morning he woke up warm and comfortable and layered in blankets, back in his own bed.

Sometimes thoughts of the world above invaded his mind: the guards still searching for him, Dream and his wrath, his lost laptop with his Theseus account. People probably were starting to wonder whether he was dead by now, after nearly two weeks of radio silence from the infamous thief, and he couldn't help but worry about the damage it would do to his reputation.

And then he remembered how easily Technoblade had been able to incapacitate him. He wouldn't last a day out there in his current state. He needed somewhere to heal, whether he liked it or not.

For now, he would stay. He liked this new routine anyway, perfectly content to just sit and read in the quiet with Technoblade. He was reading about some chick that burst out of some other god's head, trying to figure out how the fuck that was even possible, when Technoblade stood up from his chair.

Tommy glanced up at him. "Where are you going?"

Technoblade walked over to one of his bookshelves, replacing the tome he had been reading. “My training room. I need to spar.”

Training? As in, the chance to watch *Technoblade*, the supposed best fighter of the Underground, in action? Count him in.

“Great! I’ll come with you.” he chirped, already pushing himself off his armchair to follow.

Technoblade frowned at him. “No. You’re still hurt. You can’t train.”

“I’m perfectly fine, Technoblade. See?” He waved his bad arm around, hiding a wince at the sharp pain the motion caused.

Technoblade was unconvinced. “Give it a week of rest and then we’ll see.”

“But--” Tommy protested.

“You’ll just hurt yourself all over again. Then you won’t be training at all.”

Tommy scowled. “Fuckin--fine. I’ll just go.”

“Check out the west wing.” Technoblade said as he headed toward the door, “Philza will be there.”

“I don’t want to talk to fuckin’ Philza.” Tommy grumbled, “I want to stay with you.”

Technoblade leveled him a look.

“Fuck you. Fine. I’m going.”

Tommy found Philza in a real, honest-to-Prime garden.

It was unexpected, the change. One second he was in an ordinary hallway and the next instant he opened a random door to a literal paradise. He didn’t even notice Philza at first, too overwhelmed by the sheer amount of green that he was faced with.

The garden wasn't actually outside, though the gang hid it well, with ivy-covered walls painted light blue and a towering ceiling with lights that mimicked the exact color and warmth of actual sunbeams on his skin. The room was big too, which only added to the effect, with rows and rows of different crops at one corner, a calm, crystalline fish pond at another, actual, living trees in the third section, and a wild tangle of flowers and bushes in the last. That was where he spotted Philza, sitting among a thrash of tall, untamed bushes, face furrowed in concentration.

“Philza.” he blurted in surprise.

The man looked up at him from where he was kneeling along the ground and Tommy realized he had absolutely no idea what to say. His cheeks went red.

“Uh. Hi.” he finished lamely.

“Hey there mate.” Philza replied with one of his usual smiles, and for just a brief moment Tommy was tempted to just raise his white flag and retreat. The interaction was painfully awkward. Staying longer would only make it worse.

Then he remembered that he was trying to play nice. Turning the other way as soon as he saw the man probably wasn't the best way to get on Philza's good side, especially not after the gun fiasco from a few days

earlier.

Oh shit. He'd forgotten about that. Philza had been the one to clean that up. Not off to a great start, was he?

"I'm sorry," he started, still hovering by the door. Philza tilted his head at him in confusion. "Um. About the ceiling, I mean."

Philza relaxed considerably at that, chuckling softly and waving off his apology. "Nah, don't worry. Been meaning to check up on all the infrastructure anyway, and we really should have bullet-proofed the place already. Wilbur's shot a few holes in the wall himself."

He wasn't mad. After having to patch up the ceiling by himself when the whole situation had been Tommy's fault? What sort of fuckery was that? This was the whole reason he didn't trust the guy. He just didn't make sense. Nobody was this calm. It was unnerving.

"Uh." Tommy replied, "Yeah."

He hesitated by the doorway, half wanting to stay and half wanting to leave. It was a literal garden, of course he wanted to explore it, but who knew if Philza wanted him there. He wasn't going to intrude. Not because Philza sort of scared him and freaked him out and caught him off balance. Just because he was trying to play nice and all.

"You want to work with me a little?" The man offered, and there it was, his chance to stay, practically handed to him on a silver platter.

Still, Tommy hesitated. He'd never worked with actual living plants before. What if he screwed something up and pissed off Philza? What if he killed something? Philza seemed to pick up on his unease. He held up a small bucket of dark berries in one hand.

"I'm picking blackberries. It's real simple," he told him, and then at Tommy's hesitation: "You can eat whatever you pick if you'd like."

And that sealed the deal. The chance to eat real fucking fruit? He'd face Prime himself if that was what it took.

"Sure." He replied, navigating through the bramble of bushes and kneeling on the ground a few feet away from Philza.

The man held a pair of thin leather gloves out to him. "Here. So you don't get your hands dirty."

Tommy looked at the gloves and cocked an eyebrow at the man. "Like two days ago was the first time I've showered in literal years and you're giving me gloves?"

Philza realized his mistake in that instant. "Well. Uh. Yes, I suppose I am."

He could hear the smallest hint of uncertainty in the man's voice and he jumped on it. "I spent years on the streets and you think I can't take a little dirt, is that what you're telling me?"

Philza's eyes went wide.

"I mean, you don't have to take them if you don't want to, I didn't mean to assume, mate." Philza was backtracking, the panic clear on his face, and Tommy couldn't help the little cackle that slipped through. Prime, he was really falling for it, wasn't he? As if being offered gloves would offend Tommy, the kid who had literally been stabbed multiple times. This was too good. "I was just trying to offer--hey, stop laughing, you little shit."

Tommy just laughed harder.

Working with Philza was different than it was with Technoblade but not necessarily worse. With Technoblade it was quiet and comfortable, more peaceful, the only interaction between the two of them the occasional dry comment or sarcastic quip. With Philza, it was still quiet, but it was also relaxed. Friendly, almost. They worked but they also talked, chatting idly about everything and nothing at the same time, and whenever they separated to different parts of the blackberry field, Philza would always check in: asking if he was too hot, pestering him to make sure he drank enough water.

It was a bit unsettling at first, to be honest. Tommy wasn't used to meeting someone so...open with their emotions, and quite frankly it freaked him out. Out in Eastside showing emotions as easily as Philza did was a good way to get killed. They were a sign of weakness.

So to see someone so powerful smile at him so easily...it made Tommy think they were fake. A manipulation of some sort, a way to lure him in.

But after four hours of work and no sign of the facade breaking, Tommy was beginning to think it might just have been the way the man was. Philza hadn't snapped at him once yet, even when Tommy picked blackberries that weren't quite ripe or trampled a plant or tipped over his bucket of berries, so either he was really damn committed to the long con or he was just truly, sickeningly nice. Tommy wasn't sure which was more unbelievable.

He pulled another blackberry from the bush he was working on and a flash of something vibrant and colorful fluttered in his peripheral vision. An instant later, something soft and delicate and beautiful tickled the edge of his nose.

Tommy went still. The bucket of berries fell from his hand.

"A butterfly." he gasped, freezing in awe. The creature twitched, shifting along the ridge of his nose, and Tommy's eyes lit up in childish delight. From his peripheral vision he spotted Philza watching him and knew there was no way he was letting the man scare the butterfly off.

"Holy shit, Philza." he breathed, his eyes crossing as he tried to look at it, practically shaking with the excitement and the effort it took to keep still. "Holy shit. Don't move."

His mouth split into a tiny, amazed grin. The butterfly hesitated for a moment, twitched, and then took off, soaring away.

"Fuck." Tommy sprung to his feet, already running after it, "No no no, come back! I won't hurt you, I swear. Damn it!"

"Mate." Philza said from somewhere behind him, and Tommy didn't even bother to look his way. Chasing down the butterfly was just way more important.

He hurdled over a log on the ground, eyes locked onto it as it fluttered just out of his reach. "One second, Philza, I almost got her, just--"

"Tommy." Philza repeated, and something in his voice made Tommy freeze. It was the first time Philza had said his actual name, he realized.

The butterfly was forgotten. Tommy glanced over his shoulder. "Yeah?"

"You really are just a kid aren't you. ?"

Gentle. His words were always so gentle. Like the question wasn't about how well he could do his job, but about him. Tommy crumpled in the wake of them.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm uh." It was a confession and a defeat all in one. Tommy couldn't meet Philza's gaze. "I just. I don't want anyone to make it a big deal or anything. But yeah. I just turned seventeen."

"Oh." Philza said with a small, sad frown.

And, to his credit, that was all he said. No speeches about how he was just a kid, no lectures about how his job was too dangerous. That was it. They went back to picking blackberries, and even if Tommy caught Philza staring sadly at him from the side of his eye, the man didn't say anything.

That was enough.

Later, much later, after Tommy's hands and mouth were stained purple and nearly every blackberry bush was picked dry, he collapsed under the biggest oak tree in the garden, lying on his back with his arms behind his head, watching the light filter through the leaves. It wasn't long before he heard the sound of someone settling into the grass next to him. For a few moments they sat in silence, watching the butterflies dance among the plants.

"I want to make you an offer." Philza started hesitantly. Tommy propped himself up on one arm, mildly intrigued. Offers rarely ever came without strings attached, but all the berries had put him in an affable mood. He'd at least hear it out. He waited for a moment; Phil didn't continue. He was staring out at the garden with an odd mix of pride and contemplation.

"...Okay." Tommy prompted, his curiosity growing. "Go on."

Philza's lips quirked into a relaxed half grin as his gaze met Tommy's. "You know. I honestly found it quite impressive when you first arrived here. Your attempts to leave, I mean. And refusing food. Not many have that sort of perseverance, even if the whole ordeal was incredibly foolish." Tommy opened his mouth to retort at that, and Philza held up a hand, cutting him off. "Yes, yes, I know. It wasn't meant to be a criticism. I find your persistence to be rather remarkable, in fact. My father always told me it was a good quality for a businessman. I'd argue it's an even better quality for a criminal."

There was some message in the subtext, something he wasn't quite getting. Damned, confounding social situations again.

Phil was studying him, waiting for the message to click. At Tommy's furrowed brow, he continued. "We could use someone like that, in the Antarctic gang. Clearly, you have potential in other areas as well, thieving, combat, acrobatics. With a little more resources and a few years under our wing, you could easily become the best thief in the city. The best thief in our ranks. What I'm saying, Theseus: Join the Antarctic gang. We have resources, beyond your belief, connections--"

Ah. So this was a recruitment spiel then.

"No." Tommy said, a little too quick. He liked being alone. He didn't want to have to rely on anyone else. It was better when he only needed to worry about himself. He was slower when he spoke next, forcibly calm. "No, Phil. I work alone. It's been that way for the last decade. I have no desire for it to change."

Phil's eyebrows shot up. Just for an instant, before he schooled his expression back into neutrality. "Very well. Perhaps you'll change your mind yet."

"I won't." Tommy argued.

"Yes, well, at the very least you'll join us for meals sometime, though, won't you?" Philza continued, seemingly unphased, as if Tommy hadn't just turned down arguably the best job offer the Underground had to offer, "I noticed you like to take food in your room, but if you're going to stay here for the time being,

well then...surely it wouldn't hurt to talk with us more. Just for business, of course. Think of it as...expanding your network. Building some professional connections.”

Tommy tensed. Was that some sort of order? His words made it sound like a suggestion, but Philza was the leader of the gang and he had twisted his words before.

“You don’t have to.” Philza amended quickly, picking up on his unease. The tension loosened. “It’d just...be nice.”

Tommy was tempted to take up his offer—he was getting a little sick of the stale protein bars he had swiped from the kitchen. And Philza was surprisingly...nice. He wouldn't mind eating with him, not as much as before.

But there was still one major issue. “What about Wilbur? He won’t want me there. He hates me.”

“Oh mate, he doesn’t *hate* you. He just feels a little conflicted about it all. Guilty.” Phil told him, and it only made Tommy more confused. Guilty? What the fuck did Wilbur have to feel guilty over? “Come to dinner sometime, you’ll see.”

“Maybe.” Tommy muttered and physically felt Phil deflate next to him. He relented. “Fine. Tomorrow night.”

“Good. That’s good.” Phil whispered softly, and Tommy glanced over to find him smiling down at him in a way that could only be described as fond.

And he knew, he knew, that the warmth there couldn’t possibly be meant for him, that this too would burn to ash and dust like every other good thing in his life, but for just a moment he let himself bask in it, let Philza brush the hair away from his face, let his eyelashes flutter and then close.

He had never been one to let his guard down, but he somehow fell asleep there that night, under the oak tree, with the grass under his back and warmth on his skin, something calm and soft and steady running through his hair.

When Tommy showed up to the kitchen the next day, there was one seat empty.

Wilbur wasn’t there. He hadn’t shown up at all.

Dinner that night was quiet.

Chapter End Notes

Were just going to forget that I ever had a schedule lmao. I'm writing a thousand words a day, take it or leave it.

Yes, I wrote one more chapter of sorta-kind-semi fluff. Don't get too used to it, or else next chapter might take you by surprise.

Hope you all enjoyed! Thanks as always for the lovely comments :))

See you soon

a/n

Chapter Summary

sorry guys, a very important message today :((

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

for old readers this chapter was a prank where i lied about going on hiatus

for new readers this is a reminder to go check out the TLH one shot from wilbur's perspective

for everyone else this is me humbly asking you not to write a comment asking when the next chapter will be. i'm working on my double major in computer science and math right now so I'm pretty swamped, but rest assured i'm writing as quick as i can

Chapter End Notes

april fools lol

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

crimeduo reconciliation part 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

This was a horrible idea

Even Tommy, the self-proclaimed king of dumb decisions, could recognize that.

Wilbur wasn't someone to be messed around with. He all but confirmed he wanted nothing to do with Tommy when he ghosted him. That dinner had been an olive branch, one of the only Tommy had ever extended, and Wilbur had essentially snatched it from his hand, snapped it in half, and stomped it into the ground. And then set it on fire.

If it hadn't been clear before, it was now. Wilbur hated him. It was item number one on the long list of reasons why this idea was so completely awful.

Reasons number two and three consisted of the facts that Wilbur both knew how to operate guns and had a very large number of them at his disposal.

The fourth reason was that he was entirely certain Wilbur could convince Technoblade and Philza to slit his throat if he really wanted to, regardless of how kindly the two of them treated him. They were brothers in arms, after all. What was Tommy? An outsider. An imposter. He wouldn't stand a chance.

During a particularly tense check in call between him and Wilbur, the man had once threatened, in great detail, to skin him alive. That entire ordeal was reason number five.

And reason number six, the worst part of it all, was that the whole thing wasn't even his idea. It was Philza's.

Tommy had spent the days following Wilbur's brutal public repudiation alternating between moping in his room and stomping around the base, kicking whatever inanimate object dared to cross his path. At first, Philza and Techno had kept their distance, seemingly content with letting him work his anger out in his own time. But as the days went on and the stormy aura surrounding Tommy didn't recede, it became clear they were shifting to a more hands on approach--an effort led by Philza.

In the mornings he dragged Tommy from his room and took him out to the garden to sit in the almost-sun, dodging the half-hearted kicks Tommy threw at him without a word of complaint. In the afternoons he picked fresh berries or taught him the different plant varieties or showed him how to cook in the kitchen, and his smile didn't fall even when Tommy dragged his feet and told him to fuck off.

And look, Tommy knew he was acting like a total asshole, but he was upset, okay? If Wilbur hadn't wanted to talk to him, fine. If Wilbur wanted to just avoid each other for the entirety of the time he was hostage in their base, Tommy was totally on board. But Wilbur could have just told him that *before*, so Tommy didn't make a complete fool out of himself, waiting at that dinner for him to show up like an idiot. It was petty and cruel, and Tommy was pissed.

He just wanted to be angry for a while, okay? He didn't want to have to act like the whole thing was in the past, because it wasn't. He was upset. And no matter how many times he tried to make that clear to Philza, the man was just so infuriatingly patient. Tommy cursed and threatened and sulked, but the man just smiled and told another story about how he had nursed a stray kitten back to health or taken out a particularly violent Glow cartel or how Technoblade had somehow managed to light the library on fire not one but two separate times. And how the hell was he supposed to stay mad when the man kept trying to make him smile?

He'd even let Tommy try out their harpoon gun in an attempt to brighten his mood (it was a horrible idea that led to yet another large hole in the ceiling, but Tommy appreciated the gesture anyway).

So when Philza had not-so-subtly suggested that he go explore one very specific sector of the west wing while they were picking strawberries one afternoon, Tommy sort of felt like he owed it to the man to listen.

Which led him to now. Standing in front of Wilbur's bedroom door, hoping his lifespan wasn't about to get significantly shorter.

Curse his dumb, stupid moral compass. He should have just told Philza to screw off.

He couldn't turn back now, though, could he? That would mean he was afraid. Of Wilbur. And he wasn't. He wasn't.

Tommy took a step toward the door.

What was Wilbur's room going to look like? He'd kept far clear of it until now--in fact, he'd kept clear of all of the gang's rooms. It hadn't seemed like a good idea to overstep his bounds at the time, but now that he was here, well, he couldn't help but wonder.

On one hand, Wilbur was definitely an emo bitch and a total asshole, so Tommy sort of thought it was just straight up going to be a medieval torture chamber. Screams were probably like a lullaby or some shit to him. Sadistic fuck.

On the other hand, Wilbur was a pretentious prick, which made Tommy think the room would just be empty. Completely bare. White walls, white floor, the only furniture a single bed with the sheets tucked into the sides. Cold and professional.

Of course, this was all assuming that Tommy actually ever got close enough to see the room at all. Wilbur probably had some sort of sixth sense or something for when Tommy was near. He was probably going to open the door and curb stomp him any second now.

He was walking into the lion's den. There was no guarantee he'd come out with all of his limbs.

You know what, maybe he could turn back after all. It wasn't *really* cowardice if you were making a super calm, rational decision, right? Not running away so much as a tactical retreat. And that way, he could just leave and never show his--

Soft words whispered through the hall.

Tommy froze. His ears strained to hear the muffled voices. He couldn't make out anything, not quite, but one thing was clear.

They were coming from Wilbur's room.

He always had been too curious for his own good. He crept closer, and then, with one ear pressed to the door, he listened.

--thinks you hate him!" Technoblade's voice was barely recognizable. Tommy had never even heard the man raise his volume, much less actually yell.

"That makes no sense!" A voice retorted, sharp and staccato. Wilbur. Of course. "Why the fuck would he think that?"

Something loud and flat echoed from inside the room, like a hand hitting something hard. Techno's deep voice went up an octave, edged in rage. "Because you won't talk to him! Hell, you barely even glance his way, and when you do it's with this look--"

On second thought, maybe...maybe he shouldn't be listening in on this. The two of them sounded angry, angrier than he had ever heard them before, practically snarling at each other, and if Wilbur really did realize he was out there, listening in, eavesdropping on their private conversation...

Tommy didn't want to be caught in the fallout. Again, see reasons number one through six on his list. And those were only for when Wilbur was calm. Angry Wilbur was a whole different story. Tommy didn't want to get in his way.

"I can't help it! You *know* I don't like this." Wilbur hissed, "Think of how long it's taken us to get here, Techno. The kid's a risk. It'd be one thing to hold him hostage for a while, or put him in the care of one of our allies. Fuck, standard procedure would be to cut out his tongue to keep him quiet, but you and Phil seem to insist on--on *chatting* him up. As if you actually *like* having him around."

Techno deflected it with a scoff. "You seemed to like him enough when you saved him from bleedin' out."

"That's not the same thing. You know how I feel about kids in our line of work." Wilbur cried, "You know how much he reminds me of...and I don't *hate* him. There's a difference between hating someone and not wanting to risk *everything* we've spent so long building--"

"I know." Technoblade interrupted sharply, "I know. But he doesn't. It's barely been two weeks. He doesn't see it like I do. It...upsets him."

There was a long silence.

"Holy shit." Wilbur whispered, his voice so quiet and awed that Tommy had to lean closer to hear it, "Technoblade, you *actually* like the kid."

Tommy recoiled. What?

He could almost see the scowl on Technoblade's face. When the man spoke next, his voice was a grumble. "I don't know what you're talking about, Wilbur. The boy's cooperation is simply important to the mission, and--"

"Oh don't even feed me that bullshit. You've been reading together, don't think I didn't notice." Wilbur interrupted, and Tommy could picture that smug, punchable grin plastered across his face. "You've gone soft."

Soft. *Soft*?

Were they talking about the same Technoblade here? Cold, dispassionate, reluctant to show emotion, that Technoblade? And Wilbur thought that he had a soft spot for brash, annoying, unlovable Tommy. As if.

He waited for Technoblade to tell Wilbur exactly what he could do with his whole 'going soft' theory. To deny it. Technoblade wasn't the kind of person to let that sort of bullshit stand.

But the man didn't say anything. He didn't say anything at all. And then, finally:

“I thought this conversation was supposed to be about you.”

Tommy’s jaw dropped.

Wilbur just snickered. “I can’t believe it. I never thought I’d see the day. Hasn’t he tried to stab you, like, multiple times?”

A pause. And then, begrudgingly, “...he likes my myths.”

Wilbur was sent into another bout of laughter at that. “This is too good.”

“Oh, shut up.” Technoblade growled irritably, “I’m not the only one. You see Phil?”

Wilbur cackled. “Fuck yes. He practically coos every time the kid gets within a ten foot radius.”

Philza did not *coo* when he got near. He did not coo at all. Just because he and Philza got along okay didn’t mean they were friends or anything. Tommy barely even tolerated the man. Honestly. Absolute lies. Fucking bullshit.

Cooing. What the hell. Wilbur and Techno must have been on Glow. Delusional. Idiots.

“The Angel of Death, bested by a child.” Wilbur hummed. Tommy glared at the door.

“And then there’s you. Obviously.” Technoblade replied.

Wilbur went quiet for a second. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Now it was Technoblade's turn to chuckle. "Please. Don't act like you haven't been checking in on him too."

"Fuck off. I have not." Wilbur snapped back, and there it was. Finally, someone who was making some sense. At the very least he could count on Wilbur to keep him grounded, to get to the truth of things.

Wilbur didn't like him. There was comfort in the fact.

Just enough, at least, to get him to step closer to the door. Philza wasn't wrong, he was going to have to talk with Wilbur at some point. Better now, when he had the surety of knowing Wilbur's thoughts toward him.

Tommy knocked. The voices went silent.

A pause. Footsteps. The door slid open.

Caramel eyes stared down at him. “Theseus. I--I mean, Tommy.”

Tommy frowned at the man. “Wilbur.”

They stared at each other for a minute, Wilbur shifting uncomfortably and avoiding his gaze, Tommy trying to gauge his response, waiting for him to say something else. The ball was in his court, after all.

But the man just kept standing there. Not speaking, not moving. Nothing.

Tommy lost his nerve. He took a step back, and then another.

"Philza told me I should come talk to you, but clearly you don't wanna talk, so I'm just gonna--" Another step back. “Head out. Uh. Very sorry to bother you, have a nice night.”

Sharp, unreadable emotion flashed across Wilbur’s face, something that Tommy couldn’t quite make out, and then Wilbur was reaching towards him, his throat working.

“No, no wait, just--wait.” He stuttered, “Tommy.”

Tommy stopped. Looked back up at him.

“I--I, uh--” Wilbur hesitated again and his face shifted, his eyes trailing down Tommy’s body. His eyebrows furrowed. “Is that really what they have you in?”

The words caught him off guard enough that Tommy recoiled back, staring at Wilbur in shock. It took him a minute to process his question before he looked down at himself, the loose black pants and red tunic. “What, my...my clothes?”

Wilbur took advantage of his shock to snag him by the arm and guide him into his room. Tommy didn’t even have time to process that Wilbur’s bedroom was an actual homey, cozy-looking room (and not a medieval torture chamber) with a four-poster bed and a desk, a mix-match of guitars covering one wall, before Wilbur was circling at him, poking at his clothing and Tommy’s head was whipping around to follow his movement. “Those don’t even fit. That’s really what Technoblade gave you? Dear Prime, that’s horrendous.”

Tommy looked away, feeling the sudden stubborn urge to defend his clothes. Who the fuck was Wilbur to criticize his outfit? They were clothes. They were functional. What more did you need?

“I like them.” he muttered, “They’re soft. And warm.”

Wilbur faltered at that for just an instant. “Yes, well...well I won’t stand for this. Can’t have you looking like you were just dragged off the streets, can we?”

What was that even supposed to mean? He wouldn’t stand for this? Tommy fought the urge to be mildly offended. *Peace*, he reminded himself. He came here to make peace.

Wilbur surveyed Tommy, ignoring his confusion. “We’ll need new pants for sure. Ones that actually fit you around the waist. And some tunics that you can actually train in, and some boots so you aren’t walking around barefoot all the time.”

“And a cape.” Technoblade chimed in from an armchair in the corner of the room.

“And a cape!” Wilbur agreed with wild energy, “Something soft and heavy and...blue.”

“I--I don’t understand.” Wasn’t Wilbur mad at him? Where was this even coming from?

Wilbur tugged at his shirt. “We’re going to get you some proper clothes, of course. New ones.”

Uh. Well. Ignoring the absolute absurdity of that, how was that supposed to work? They were in an underground complex for Prime’s sake. Wasn’t like designer outfits were in high supply here. He pointed this out. “I uh, I don’t mean to rain on your parade or anything, but... where?”

Wilbur gave him a strange look. “Pogtopia, Th--Tommy. The Depths.”

That cleared up literally nothing. If anything, it only served to make him more confused. They didn’t sell clothing in the Underground. People had more important things to worry about than that. And what the fuck were the Depths?

“Wilbur, what are you talking about?”

“Wait...” Wilbur cocked his head at Tommy, a gesture eerily similar to the one Philza always did. “You...you haven’t seen it, have you? You haven’t ever made it down this far?”

“What? No?”

Why would he ever go that deep into the Underground of his own free will? All that was down there was cults and gangs and certain death. Why would he risk that?

"Oh my." A slow, dangerous smile spread across Wilbur's face. All teeth, like a wolf about to tear out a deer's throat. "Are you in for a surprise."

In a flash, Wilbur grabbed his trenchcoat from a hook on the wall, pulling it over his shoulders. "Come on then. Technoblade, grab Phil."

He looked over his shoulder at Tommy, his grin manic, his eyes lit with fire. "It's time we give you a proper tour of the Underground."

Tommy was still utterly confused as to what, exactly, was happening. Wilbur hadn't explained anything during their walk to the kitchen--in fact, he'd made it a point not to answer any of Tommy's questions at all.

Frankly, it was starting to piss him off. The man was giving him emotional whiplash.

Not two minutes earlier Wilbur had been grinning at him with wild excitement. Now he was depositing him in the kitchen without so much as a second glance.

"I'm going to go get everything ready. Stay here." he told him, and then he was gone, leaving Tommy with even more questions than before.

Going to get what ready?

The door slid open.

"Tommy!" Philza called with a smile, strolling into the room. His mechanical wings were on again, spread to full display, and Tommy shifted a little further away from them. Philza might have been nice, but he still didn't trust the man when he had a ten foot wingspan of knives. "I see your talk with Wilbur went well."

Tommy scowled. "If you call him insulting my outfit and calling me dumb 'going well' then yeah, sure."

Philza's grin faltered. "I'm sure he didn't say...I mean we're going into the city, right? Surely it can't have gone that bad if he's taking you to Hannah's."

Tommy was getting more frustrated by the second. "The city? Hannah's? You're outlaws. You can't go into the Lights."

Philza glanced at him with a strange expression, his head tilting like it always did. "That's not the city I'm talking about."

Tommy glared at him. "What the fuck. Can someone please explain anything?"

Techno gave Philza a Look. Realization flashed across his face.

Philza sighed. "Wilbur didn't fill you in, I presume?"

"It's Wilbur." Technoblade replied, "Of course he didn't."

"Prime." Phil exhaled, "I mean, I'd assumed you had been down because you were Theseus, but...mate, what exactly have you heard about the Depths?"

"Deep, endless caverns with the appearance and population of the pits of hell."

"What? No, that's nothing like it at all." the man pulled out Tommy's chair from the table, gesturing toward it. "You know what, just...take a seat, mate. We'll have to start from the beginning."

"Phil, no." Techno groaned, running a hand across his face.

Philza threw his hands in the air. "He doesn't know the history! I'm just teaching him."

"Will! Phil's telling the story again." Techno shouted toward the hallway.

"Phil, Tommy doesn't wanna hear it too, I'm sure he already knows." the man called from somewhere outside the room.

"Shut!" Philza shouted back with a grin.

He turned his gaze back toward Tommy, his expression settling into something far more serious. "Now, thirty two years ago there was the Flash. You know about the Flash, at least?"

Tommy rolled his eyes. Of course he knew about the Flash. Who didn't? "War, nukes, earthquakes, volcanoes, mobs. In that order."

"Right. Almost." Philza agreed, and then he hesitated.

His eyes went deep and silver, his voice dropping an octave into something mysterious and heavy. "Not quite, though. They weren't nukes. The bombs were different, see? Something that hadn't been seen before, that hadn't been tested. But the war was so violent, so destructive that...Well, they didn't think they had a choice."

"Might as well settle in, kid." Technoblade chimed in, shrugging. "Once he gets started he's not going to stop. Hope you like history lessons."

Tommy did not, in fact, like history lessons. History was the subject he'd liked the least, in fact. He'd gone through about five different tutors before his parents had just given up teaching him it, focusing instead on what he was actually good at; design and science. He sagged in his chair.

Philza continued, undeterred, leaning closer to Tommy with wild light in his eyes. "It was devastating. Twice as big as a nuke, somehow even more radioactive, with a flash so bright that hundreds of miles away the folks who saw it had blood trailing from their eyes. The ones closer went blind. Even closer, their skin melted off their bones."

Oh. Oh shit. Maybe Tommy was interested in this history lesson after all.

"Of course," Philza continued, "All it took was one inside man, one whisper of a word, and everyone had them. And once the first went off...well, that was it. Nobody held back after that. It was madness. Everybody out to eliminate everyone else. Every country going for the kill."

"The targets were obvious. When you're going for the highest number of fatalities, you find the area with the highest population density, packed with people and companies and the lifeblood of the country."

Something twisted in Tommy's gut.

"The cities." He whispered.

Philza nodded, eyes grave. "Not the military bases. Not the government. The world struck at its own cities."

"You know how much of the world lived in those cities? Half. Half the population of the world, gone in two days. The world's greatest infrastructure in ruins. They thought it was over, that they could pick themselves back off the ground and begin again."

"Have we reached the nuclear waste yet?" Wilbur interrupted, appearing at Technoblade's side.

The man glanced toward him, mirth in his eyes. "It's coming. We're at 'they were wrong' right now."

"Boys, shut." Philza retorted, breaking character for just a second before he leaned back toward Tommy. His voice dipped back into something deep and practiced. "The survivors thought the worst had passed. They were wrong."

Tommy leaned closer, eyes wide. Out of the corner of his eye, Wilbur grinned, nudging Techno and nodding toward him.

Philza continued. "An ancient scientist once said everything must have an equal and opposite reaction. Sending the energy of dozens of bombs rippling through the depths of the Earth...the opposite reaction was bound to be devastating. The bombs caused earthquakes. The earthquakes caused tsunamis. *They* caused the eruptions. Only twenty percent survived those."

"Hurry up, Phil." Wilbur groaned, flopping across a kitchen chair, "We wanna get to the fun part."

Technoblade elbowed him. "Phil's old. You can't fault him for being a little slow."

Tommy stifled a grin.

"Boys! Nothing is fun about the fall of humanity. Shush!" Philza snapped, not unkindly, glancing warmly over toward the two of them before turning back to Tommy.

"Anyway, just as people began to recover from that--well, that's when twisted, bloodthirsty creatures began crawling out of the ruins of the cities. The mobs. Our best guess is the radiation, all that nuclear waste must have mutated whatever biotic creatures remained in the wreckage. Changed their genetic code, turned them into monsters out for human flesh. And only in the face of this carnage and blood and ash, did the people unite."

"At the dusk of humanity, Lmanburg was founded. Despite the odds, a year later they had amassed enough people and resources to build the Walls. At the same time as the blackstone was built up, however, the president of the city worked on a far more secret project, a second line of defense so to speak--a massive cavern beneath the city built to hold thousands, just in case the Walls ever fell."

"By the time Lmanburg fell sixteen years ago, the project had been long forgotten. But as Schlatt took control and people dug deeper into the ground in search of escape...well, it's safe to say the city was rediscovered. You'll see. Wilbur, open the doors."

The doors?

Couldn't these people explain anything? Why the hell did he always get stuck with the insane people? This was a kitchen. There was one door, and it was already open.

"On it!" Wilbur yelled, disappearing from his view.

Something in the room clicked and then popped and then the entire room stirred, and then, in front of Tommy's eyes, the walls shifted and slid apart, opening to a metal elevator with a wide glass window. Because of course the gang's kitchen needed a secret door. No wonder he had never been able to find the exit.

Outside the window, as far as he could see, was a burst of light against the darkness, a vast silhouette of metal and stone, massive and glowing and alive.

A city.

A hand settled on his shoulder. "Tommy, welcome to the Depths."

Chapter End Notes

ayo sorry for the short chapter this week i'm moving into college (freedom !!!!) so i had to split this chapter in two. trust me when i say next chapter will be twice as long and twice as fun (for me. not for you)

i've realized my author's notes can sometimes be a tinyyyy bit ominous, so i just wanted to apologize in advance. sorry guys, thinly veiled threats are my love language. just roll with it.

hope y'all enjoyed. see you soon :))

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

One step forward, two steps back

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The best way to describe the Depths was as a shadowy reflection of the Lights.

Where the Lights were silver and gold and steel, the Depths were dark stone and obsidian. Where the Lights was surrounded by gray sky and open air, the entirety of the Depths was swallowed up by a yawning cavern at least a mile wide and twice as far across, hundreds of meters tall. Where the Lights felt organized and ordered, the streets cut into an even grid and boxy buildings, this felt more anarchic, a jumble of stone brick and the gray cave stone, the buildings a mish-mash of curves and corners jutting out at odd angles.

It was chaos.

Massive stalactites sprung up from the ground at random, and it looked like the architects had just said 'fuck it' and built right into them. Nearly every building Tommy spotted was at least ten stories high and just a little too crooked for his liking, and in the center of it all towered a single, massive skyscraper so tall it appeared to go straight through the roof of the cavern. The streets he could see seemed to twist and curve at random, lined with market stalls dressed in vibrant silk and dotted with the shapes of hundreds of people. Even from up in the elevator he could hear the vibration of their feet on the pavement, the jumble of their voices overlapping.

And that was when he realized what had been gnawing at the back of his mind, what was throwing him so off guard: this place felt *alive*.

It was a feeling he had never gotten from the Lights.

Still, despite everything, Tommy couldn't help but think the two cities were strikingly similar, all things considered. He wasn't particularly sure why. The two couldn't possibly have been any more different.

Maybe it was because the Lights was the only city he had ever seen. Maybe it was just the only point of reference he had to what a city was actually like other than pictures and Techno's books and a few decades-old descriptions from those who had survived the Flash. He couldn't help it that the first thing he noticed about the Depths was how similar its silhouette was to the Lights' in the dim glow of the cavern.

The second thing that Tommy noticed was that half of the city was upside down.

You would think that would be the first thing he'd notice, something as unnatural as half of the city bottom up in the sky. It wasn't. Just as Tommy thought he had come to grips with there being an entire city underneath the surface of Manburg, his gaze flickered upward.

The shock of it sent him stumbling back into Technoblade, staring up at the blocky buildings on the ceiling of the cavern in awe and confusion.

It was like the city had been mirrored across the ceiling. As if the top half of the cavern was a reflection in water, murky and distant but still there, leaving him wondering whether it was a trick of the light. Like if he

reached out to touch it it would dissolve back into nothing.

Or was this just a thing that happened down here? Had they somehow learned how to defy gravity now? With that sort of tech, why the hell would they be hiding down *here*? With machinery like that they could overthrow Schlatt in an instant.

Tommy stepped closer to the window, pressing his face against the cool glass to peer up at them. He could see the shadows in their distant windows, little glimpses of movement which, strangely, were still the right way up...

And then he realized that the buildings weren't upside down so much as hanging from the ceiling. It wasn't that they had reversed gravity so much as given the illusion of it. The buildings were upside down. Everything else was the right way up.

Which was super cool and all, but *why*? That seemed so...inefficient.

Philza noticed his stare.

"The cavern can't be expanded," he explained, nudging Tommy's shoulder with one wing as he ushered the three of them into the elevator and pressed a button to shut the door. "They would need to use explosives to extend it any more, and now that the city's fully built it'd be too risky to the structural integrity of the place. Still, as more and more people came down here the place got crowded pretty quick. People had to get creative."

He pointed out the window at the sides of the massive cavern as the elevator shifted into motion, drawing Tommy's attention to the hundreds of other windows he could spot embedded in the cavern's walls. "Some, like us, chose to build into the walls."

Philza's gaze shifted to the cavern's roof. "Others chose to come from above."

Tommy leaned in closer still, smushing his nose into the window as he eyed the unnatural city. "How do they even get up there?"

"See the big building?" Philza replied, pointing toward the center of the city where the one extra-tall skyscraper stretched across the empty space, "It's the only one that goes from the cavern floor to its ceiling. Everyone goes up through that."

Tommy frowned, staring at the towering skyscraper "It's very intimidating. Like, why'd they make it so much taller than everything else? Couldn't they just go up through the cave walls?"

"They needed a way to bridge the gap." Philza told him, shrugging, "And everyone from across the city needed to be able to access it. So the Community House it was."

Tommy stared at the stern steel building for a second before he turned back to Philza.

"The Community House?" he blurted, "*That's* what they named it?"

"...yes?"

What--why did he sound so confused? Had literally nobody else considered that was the worst possible thing to call it?

"That has got to be the dumbest name I have ever heard. What--that's not even a *house*? And like, look at it." Tommy gestured wildly at the building, a horrible metal amalgamation of lethally sharp corners and harsh edges and tinted black windows. "Does *that* inspire a sense of community for you? Really?"

Wilbur winced. "I mean it's not...*horrible*."

It was a weak response and they both knew it. The edges of Technoblade's mouth tilted into a frown from under his boar skull mask.

"It's a very respectable slate gray." He defended, crossing his arms over his chest, "Solemn. Professional. I rather like it."

Okay, this was bullshit. Tommy looked to the last member of the gang for a voice of *reason*.

"You see my point, Phil." Tommy insisted, "*Techno* likes it. You see my point."

Philza stifled a grin. Tommy had a feeling he wasn't taking this quite as seriously as he was. He glared at the man. "That is not a Community House. That is a fuckin' Intimidation Tower."

"Sure, Tommy." Philza replied, though Tommy had the sense he was only saying that to appease him and not because he actually bought into it. Whatever. He would convince him at some point.

The elevator settled to a stop and Philza led them out into a long hallway. Doors lined either side, thick and wooden instead of their usual glass.

Tommy ran ahead and tried the handle on one of them. Locked.

He turned to the gang. "What's in these?"

The effect was instantaneous. Wilbur's eyes shuttered, Techno's mouth pressed into a firm line, Philza wouldn't meet his gaze.

Oh yeah. These rooms for sure had some cool shit in them. Though from the way the three of them were still shiftily avoiding his eyes he had the feeling they weren't nearly as excited about showing him the rooms as he was.

Still, he had never been one to care about what they thought. "So?"

Wilbur was the first to answer. "Nothing."

Because that definitely wasn't suspicious. Tommy tapped his foot impatiently. "Then I can go in them, then. If there's nothing there."

"No, no, nope. That's gang stuff."

Tommy raised an eyebrow. "Well, I'm like technically a gang employee now, right? As a business partner I should have access to that sort of stuff, yeah?"

A strange look flashed across Wilbur's face, something dark and unreadable. His hand wrapped around Tommy's wrist and pulled him down the hall, far gentler than Tommy would have expected from Wilbur. "Let's just head out to the city. We have an appointment to keep."

He was being watched.

Tommy had felt it from the instant they had stepped out of the base, the eyes latching onto him and the gang, the gazes that lingered on the four of them. It was unsettling.

I mean, sure, they weren't the most subtle with their capes and Techo's mask and Philza's wings and the gun strapped to Wilbur's side, but he didn't think it was *that* noticeable. Certainly not enough for every person they encountered to edge away from them like they were carrying a plague.

It only got worse once they reached the crowd. It was clear the area was some sort of marketplace, what with the abrupt appearance of tents and wooden stalls along the sides of the streets, not to mention the density of people in the street increased ten-fold. It was then, as they started to make their way through the market, that Tommy noticed something else.

No one was walking near them. The rest of the crowd was a jumbled, frantic mess of shopkeepers yelling their wares and customers bargaining and people pushing past each other, but none of it was directed towards them. No one was so much as drawing near, taking pains to walk far around them. It was like there was a force field surrounding them: it was the same chaotic mess of people as usual until about two meters in front of Wilbur and then there was just empty space. A little bubble of peace surrounding them.

Bright red alarm bells started to blare in his head.

It hadn't quite hit him earlier, that Wilbur and Philza and Techno were still the Antarctic gang. That even in the secret Underground city they might be something of celebrities. And not just that, but...its leaders too, perhaps? They certainly had to be powerful. Only that would explain the looks; no matter where he glanced he could see eyes locked on to them.

The gazes that he met were respectful, yes, but there was fear there too.

He wasn't entirely positive, but he had a sinking suspicion that the Antarctic gang ran this city.

Phil didn't seem to pick up on the realization that was beginning to piece itself together in his mind. He leaned toward Tommy, pointing at one of the countless shops on the side of the street.

"The city functions as more of a marketplace than anything else. Some people live here, sure, but most just come and go whenever they need to buy or sell supplies, so almost all of the northern half of the city is just storefronts and market stalls."

"What about the southern half?" Tommy asked.

Phil's eyes shuttered. He turned away. "Stay away from the south side, mate."

What was that supposed to mean? "Why, what's in the south half?" Tommy asked.

Wilbur, who had been listening in, frowned disapprovingly. "Nothing you want to walk into."

Honestly, that only made Tommy want to explore it more. How many times would his curiosity get the best of him before the gang realized it was better to just tell him things point blank? Evading the question would only encourage him to find out for himself.

Technoblade must have noticed the curiosity sparking in his gaze because a firm hand settled on his shoulder and the man leaned in close enough that the edges of his mask almost touched Tommy's face. "Kid, you really want to get lost on your first day in the city?"

And...to be fair that was actually a decent point. Tommy hesitated.

Techno nodded, seemingly satisfied with that reaction. "That's what I thought. Just stay with us for now."

Yeah, whatever. He'd keep close. Not because he needed to or because Techno wanted it or anything. Just...because.

So he nodded absentmindedly at Techno's instruction and kept strolling along with the gang, lingering by a bakery stall when the smell of fresh bread hit his nose.

"Stay nearby." Techno repeated, sharper this time, "The city is still dangerous. Everybody comes to Pogtopia for a reason."

Tommy made a face. "Okay, Mr. Big Bad Technoblade, I get it. You don't want me to get lost in the super scary city."

Like, he got the point. Stay close, dangerous city, blah blah blah. He wasn't planning to wander off or anything, he didn't need a whole lecture. He nodded absentmindedly.

Techno's expression went intense.

"Theseus, you need to understand. The Depths don't have laws. The only reason it hasn't fallen into complete chaos is because everyone knows that up there--" He pointed sharply toward the surface, "Is worse than down here. This whole place is a fragile balance held together on good intentions. Capiche?"

"This half is under our control, kid, you get that? It might look all bright and sunny over here, but that's on this side of the cave. The people who rule the other half aren't quite so gracious. So unless you really do want to experience the cults and murder you talked about stay nearby, okay?"

That, at least, struck a chord.

The gang had always underestimated him, sure, but out of all of them Techno was always the one who had given it to him straight. He'd seen what Tommy could do, had been there for days and days as he tried to escape. He knew just how stubborn he was, and just how much he hated being deceived.

If anyone was going to tell him the truth of things it was Technoblade.

So if blunt, brutal Techno told him with such surety that the south side of the city was a death sentence, then he'd stay away.

He liked this whole VIP treatment they were getting anyway. He'd stick with the gang, just for now.

Or at least, that was the plan. And then Tommy spotted a market stalls projecting little holographic animals into the air, and the plan was forgotten.

As if in a trance he pivoted, leaving the little bubble of space around the gang and descending into the crowd. No shouts echoed behind him, no calls for his name. The gang hadn't even noticed he was gone.

He kept pushing through the throngs of the crowd until he was standing right in front of the stall, watching in awe as a Robin fluttered around his head.

The holograms were surprisingly detailed, with full fluid motion and all the vivid colors of the real thing-- Tommy might have mistaken them for actual animals if not for the blur around their edges and the faint hum of electricity.

A stingray floated past his feet, the blur of a hawk swooped past, and then a hummingbird joined the mix, chasing after the robin. A surprised laugh burst out of his mouth before he could stop it.

He spun in place, whipping his head around as he tried to follow the blurs of movement whizzing past him.

"You like the holograms, don't you kid?" A voice interrupted, and Tommy looked up to find a burly shopkeeper smiling down at him. "One of my finest creations, they are. You interested in buying one?"

Yes. Definitely yes. They did *not* have this sort of stuff in the slums. Prime, he hadn't even seen a real bird in ages other than the pigeons that plagued the streets. Of course he wanted one. They were fucking cool.

Problem was the gang hadn't really given him his Prime cards back. He was broke.

Usually, that wouldn't be a problem. He was a thief, for fuck's sake. He could just, you know, *thieve*.

But the shopkeeper here was at least twice his size, had arms like tree trunks, and had his direct focus on Tommy. Pocketing one of his quote un-quote 'finest creations' probably wouldn't go down too well.

"Fuckin' Wilbur," Tommy grumbled, "Probably stole 'em for himself, greedy bastard, when I see that b--"

Something yanked the back of his neck

"Theseus." Techno growled, hand fisted in the back of Tommy's cloak, "What did I say about staying close?"

Oh yeah. That. How had he forgotten about that? "Techno, there were these lights, you should have seen the *birds--*"

"Kid, I *said--*" Techno started, clearly exasperated, letting go of Tommy's cloak so he could spin on him.

Tommy crossed his arms over his chest, scowling right back. "What did you expect, for me to just ignore them?"

"*Yes!*"

Tommy rolled his eyes. As if. In no world would he ever have ignored those holograms.

Techno seemed to realize he was working with a lost cause.

"Just," he sighed, running a hand down his face before he pulled something out of his pocket and clicked it around Tommy's wrist. A shiny golden bracelet, inlaid with tiny emeralds. "Here. Wear."

"*Wha--*"

Steady hands clasped a gold chain around his neck before he could get the objection out of his mouth. Tommy looked up at Technoblade, baffled. "What the fuck?"

Techno didn't bother answering. He just put another ring on Tommy's finger.

"So they know not to bother you." he said, as if that made it any more clear, and then he pivoted on one heel and stalked up to where Wilbur was strolling through the crowd.

Tommy stared down at the jewelry. A muffled laugh came from somewhere behind him, and he spun to face it.

Philza. Grinning at him like Technoblade hadn't just randomly draped jewelry all over him.

"Philza, what the fuck." Tommy deadpanned.

Philza shrugged. "Gold is sort of his calling card. Just roll with it, Techno's a little overprotective."

He settled a wing over Tommy's shoulder, threading an arm through his elbow. "Don't worry about it too much. Just stay nearby and you'll be alright."

Phil's expression went steely. The wing draped across Tommy's shoulders pulled even closer.

Something dark flashed across his face. "Everyone with half a brain knows what happens when you mess with my boys. No one will lay a hand on you."

The expression was gone so quickly Tommy wasn't sure if he had imagined it, swept off his face like a storm cloud on a sunny day, and he grinned down at Tommy pulling them both into line behind where Wilbur and Techno were strolling.

They kept on like that for another ten minutes, Wilbur and Techno mumbling to each other just out of earshot, Philza keeping Tommy from running off to another market stall, until they reached an intersection of streets and Phil brought their group to a stop.

His hand slipped away from where it had been resting in the crook of Tommy's arm and something within him mourned the loss of contact. The rest of him was much more concerned on the fact that Philza and Techno were drawing back, stepping away from him, while Wilbur, on the other hand, decidedly was not.

Tommy's gaze flashed between them, a pit of unease growing in his stomach, and when he locked eyes with Philza the man gave him an apologetic smile.

Safe to say, that did not help.

"What?" Tommy's voice quavered, just a little bit, "What's happening?"

Philza gestured down the opposite street. "Techno and I are heading off to the blacksmith's district for some business while Wilbur takes you to Hannah's. Use Will's holopad if you need us, okay?"

The realization hit.

"Wait," Tommy snapped, "You're leaving me with *him*..?"

His eyes shot to Philza, a clear message shining in them. *Help*.

"Oh Tommy." The man said softly, "You'll be alright."

So Philza was a lost cause. Tommy's gaze swung over to the only other member of the gang, his last hope at getting out of this.

"Techno." he pleaded.

The man didn't falter. "Go on, kid."

Just like that, they turned away, strolling down the street opposite them.

Leaving him and Wilbur. Alone.

If this whole outing was, as he suspected, Philza's elaborate scheme to force him and Wilbur to make up, it was not working by any meaning of the word.

Wilbur was practically dragging him through the streets, one hand locked around Tommy's wrist as if he was afraid he would get lost if he let go for even a second.

Philza had told them they could take their time browsing the markets. There was no rush, he had said. Tommy should get a chance to explore, he had told them.

Wilbur clearly didn't share the same sentiments because he hadn't even slowed down once, much less paused to give Tommy a chance to look at the merchant's stalls.

Through the gaps in the horde of people, in brief flashes before he got dragged away, he could sometimes spot what they were selling. Strange, vibrant fruits, an aquarium full of exotic fish, wickedly sharp silver blades--

"Holy shit, are those knives?" Tommy gasped, tugging against Wilbur's hand.

"No."

“But Wilbur--”

“Not a chance.” Wilbur didn't even slow down. By the time Tommy looked back out towards the market the knives were long gone.

Tommy glared daggers (like the ones he wouldn't ever get to buy) at Wilbur's back. “You're a bitch, you know that?”

Wilbur smirked. “If I'm a bitch then you're a gremlin.”

“What--what the fuck is that even supposed to mean?” Tommy tried and failed to yank his hand out of Wilbur's grip. Wilbur just kept dragging him forward.

“You're tiny--”

Tiny? Tommy aimed a kick at the back of Wilbur's ankle and missed. “I--I am not tiny. I'll fuckin' show you tiny, I'll stab you in the fucking eyes--”

He kicked and missed again. In his defense, it was awfully hard to aim when you were being half-dragged down the street.

Wilbur was unphased. “--and annoying and you like to steal things. Gremlin.”

"*Will--*" Tommy started, still trying to step on the back of his shoes, when Wilbur stopped dead in his tracks. Tommy slammed into his back.

"We're here."

The shop was pretty much exactly what Tommy expected for a clothing boutique. Quaint brick walls, glossy windows and glass doors, adorned with a massive sign that read *Hannah's* in cursive lettering. Wilbur dragged him up to the front step, though Tommy was intrigued enough with the shop that by that point he wasn't so much dragging him as guiding him towards the entrance.

Someone opened the door from the inside just as they went to enter, sending Tommy stumbling back behind Wilbur. A woman stepped out of the shop and into view.

She had a shock of curly white hair poking out from under a pointed captain's hat and a soft face that made Tommy want to trust her even if he didn't, yet somehow, despite also being significantly shorter than both of them, the woman radiated enough authority to make even Tommy shrink back.

Her gaze went icy as it locked on Wilbur.

"Wilbur." The woman greeted coldly. Tommy had never seen Wilbur look so small.

"Captain." Wilbur responded, his head bowed, and Tommy flinched further back. It was just...*wrong*, seeing Wilbur act so respectful. Fucking unnatural.

"What brings you out here? Don't you have responsibilities elsewhere?" The woman--the Captain--asked, though it sounded more like a command than a question. Namely, a command to *get the fuck away from me*. Wilbur, clearly recognizing that he was in deep shit, stepped aside and gestured sheepishly at Tommy--which like, gee thanks a lot for throwing him under the bus--and Tommy braced himself for the woman's scolding gaze to focus on him.

When it did, the woman's expression made the radical shift from impossibly stern to the kindest smile Tommy had ever seen. And it was directed at him.

"Oh! Hello there. I'm Puffy." The woman chirped, catching Tommy completely off guard. Where was the same hostility she had given to Wilbur?

"Hi?" He replied, though it came out as more of a squeak than an actual coherent reply.

If anything that just made the Captain--Puffy? What was he supposed to call her?--smile wider, stepping around Wilbur. "Would you like a flower? A not-so-little bird mentioned you liked his poppies."

For just a second Tommy forgot that this woman was the literal definition of terrifying. He perked up, eyes widening. "You have flowers here too?"

"Of course. Hannah has her own rose garden." Puffy reached inside her coat, pulling out a delicate red flower and tucking it behind Tommy's ear, "Here, kiddo."

"Whoa." Tommy gasped, carefully reaching up a hand to skim the petals of the flower, like he was assuring himself it was real, "Thanks."

"You're welcome, sweetheart. Now. Wilbur." Her tone suddenly went hard again as she shifted her attention back to Wilbur, "We need to discuss some of the details of your most recent--" Her gaze flitted over to Tommy in a way that was not at all subtle, "--acquisition."

"Y-yeah, of course. Ma'am." Wilbur replied, and Tommy was once again hit with that sense of *wrongness*. Was this what Wilbur was always like with the gang's partners? So...fake? He supposed Wilbur wasn't called the Siren for no reason, but it was weird to see him act so charming when usually he was a snippy jerk. "Tommy, why don't you head into the back while I handle this? Hannah will meet you there."

First Philza and Techno, and now Wilbur was ditching him too?

Go into the building alone? Wilbur was supposed to be guiding him around. Who knew what was in there?

"Wilbur--" he protested.

"Tommy." Wilbur snapped, his eyes locked on the Captain. "Go."

Puffy stared straight back, eyes steely. The tension between the two was stifling, to say the least. Tommy had a feeling someone was about to get their ass beat, and he had a feeling it wasn't Puffy. And as much as that sounded amazing to watch, Wilbur was already in a pissy mood. Best not to push his luck.

Tommy went.

It wasn't long before Tommy met the owner of the boutique. He hadn't gone three steps into the shop before a lilting voice spoke from behind him. "So you're the next little bird in Philza's flock, huh?"

Tommy spun in a flash to face the newcomer, only to find another woman peering up at him.

Honestly, she might've been the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Flowing brown hair woven with roses, shining crystal blue eyes, an elegant pink halter dress, and a smile like the sun, all directed at him.

Tommy blinked. And blinked again. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, where are my manners?" The woman hummed, "I'm Hannah. I'm the owner of this fine boutique."

"And you," She patted the top of Tommy's head lightly, "Are the new kid Phil's decided to adopt. Yes?"

Tommy blinked. Again. "Adopt."

Prime, he needed to get a grip. Had his mind lost control of his mouth or something? Why the hell was he talking like a dunce?

Hannah didn't seem to notice, intertwining her hand in his and leading him to a pedestal in the center of the room, "I mean, the man's always had a habit of taking in strays. First Wilbur, sixteen years ago. Then Technoblade, five years later. I knew it was only a matter of time till he got a third."

"But they're...partners." Tommy stuttered, still a little thrown off by the whole beautiful woman talking to him thing.

"You haven't been around long, have you? Those three are thicker than thieves." Hannah spun around and glided over to one wall of the shop, rifling through silky ropes of fabric, "Though I suppose there'll be four of them now that you're there too."

That, at least, was enough to snap Tommy out of his stupor. He couldn't let her absorb these idiotic ideas into her head. "Lady, I don't know how to break this to you, but I'm not being *adopted*. We work together. It's strictly a business relationship."

"Mhmm." The woman nodded like she knew something Tommy didn't, "That's what Techno said when they brought him here too."

"Look, lady--" Tommy growled, just about ready to tell this Hannah chick to mind her own fucking business, when Wilbur swept into the room.

"Hannah!" he called with a grin and the two of them collided into a hug.

"Wilbur!" Hannah patted his cheek affectionately as she pulled away, "Lovely. The kid is just darling. Reminds me of Techno."

Wilbur settled into an armchair against the wall of the room, crossing his legs and leaning forward with one palm on his chin. "They are similar, aren't they?"

Hannah grinned conspiratorially over her shoulder as she picked up another swath of fabric. "Ooh, so Techno likes him then. Has he started training him yet?"

"It's only a matter of time." Wilbur replied.

Tommy's head whipped back and forth between the two of them. "What the fuck are you people talking about?"

"Don't you worry, darling." Hannah told him, gliding over from her desk with a tape measure in hand, "Stand still and we'll get started. We'll do some measurements first."

The tape wrapped around his hip, then his shoulder, then his arm. "Oh my, he's *skinny*. You are feeding him, aren't you Wilbur?"

Wilbur gave Tommy a Look and Tommy knew he was thinking about the days and days that he had refused to eat anything at all. "It's not as easy as it might sound."

"You really must eat more, darling." Hannah frowned at him and for once Tommy felt guilty, "Growing boy and all."

She pivoted toward Wilbur.

"Well then Will, what are you looking for today? Tunics? Boots? Or--oh! Some capes?" She wiggled her eyebrows.

Wilbur hummed. "I was thinking something light blue."

Hannah's eyes lit up with wild delight, her mouth stretching into a cheeky grin. "Light blue? Like the official color of the Antarctic gang blue? Like the color matching the capes that you and Techno and Phil all have blue?"

The room went silent. Tommy very pointedly did not glance in Wilbur's direction. He didn't want to see his expression.

He couldn't stop himself from *hearing* Wilbur though.

"*Hannah*." the man interjected sharply. Tommy glanced over at her.

She seemed entirely unphased. Her eyes still shining with mischievous light. "Sorry Mr. Wilbur, didn't hear an answer there. I need to know if I'm going to make the cape."

Through gritted teeth, Wilbur forced out his answer. "Yes."

"Great!" Hannah chirped, oblivious to all the crushing tension she had just caused, "I'll be right back with all those materials then."

She glided out of the room with a swoosh of her dress. Tommy didn't look toward Wilbur. The room descended into an awkward silence.

"Tommy." Wilbur started slowly an eternity later, "You know I don't...hate you, right?"

Tommy glanced up at him. What, had Phil put him up to this?

"Sure." He replied. Wilbur's eyebrows furrowed.

"I mean it. I heard from Techno that you thought...you thought that I was going to kill you or something. And before, you always looked at me like," Wilbur swallowed, "Like you were terrified of me. I just want you to know. You're alright."

Okay. Now this was just getting cruel. He got that Phil wanted him and Wilbur to get along and all, but forcing them to go out together so Wilbur could make some sort of fabricated speech about how Tommy was 'alright'? Nah. He wasn't listening to this.

"Then why didn't you come to dinner, huh? Explain that." Tommy barked. He wasn't letting him off so easy.

Wilbur's face went distressed. "I... I just felt guilty, Tommy. I couldn't face you."

And Tommy snapped. Guilty. *Guilty*? Why the hell did everyone keep telling him that? That didn't make *any* *fucking* sense.

"That's what everyone keeps telling me, but I don't fucking get it!" Tommy screeched, "Why would *you* be guilty? You didn't *do* anything!"

"I--I can't--" Wilbur faltered, shrinking in on himself.

Tommy cut him off before he could come up with some lame excuse. "Prime, I'm so *sick* of everybody not telling me things! What? What is it, that could possibly have made you so fucking guilty that you ignored me for *weeks*, Wilbur? Huh?"

"I put you in danger." Wilbur told him.

Was this guy's head made of bricks? What would it take to get through there? When would he get it?

Tommy rolled his eyes. "No, I put *myself* in danger. I don't know what you people don't get, I *chose* to be Theseus. You didn't put me in danger just because you fucking hired me."

"No, that's not--" Wilbur started

Tommy groaned, his voice going a tad quieter as he realized just how loud he was yelling. "Get over it, Will. This isn't about you. So I got hurt. Fucking occupational hazard. Deal with it."

Wilbur frowned. "You don't get it."

Tommy just scowled. Yeah, he didn't get it. Sure. "Whatever. Fine. Keep moping then you bitch. See if I care."

They fell into silence for a split second, but Tommy couldn't just leave it at that. He had already yelled at Wilbur, might as well get everything else off his chest, right?

"Prime," he ranted, "I can't believe this whole time you've been ignoring me because of *this*. I--I liked you, you know. I liked talking to you. I looked forward to our calls. And then I learned that you didn't want me to be hired at all, and then you kept ignoring me, and I thought that the whole thing was a farce and you wanted me dead."

Wilbur was quiet.

"I liked talking to you too, for what it's worth." He said a minute later, "In another life, I like to think...maybe we could've been friends."

It was the closest Wilbur had ever gotten to an apology. The fight went out of Tommy.

He smiled weakly. "Not friends. You're too old for that. And you're too much of a bitch."

"Brothers, then." Wilbur whispered softly, delicately, the word fragile between them.

"Brothers." Tommy agreed.

Wilbur sighed, running a hand through his mop of hair. "I shouldn't have avoided you. I...I'm sorry."

Oh. Oh my. An actual apology this time. Tommy got that this was a solemn moment and all, but he had no idea when he'd hear this again. He couldn't help but take advantage of it.

He gave Wilbur the biggest shit-eating grin he could muster. "Sorry, what was that? I couldn't quite make that out. Was the great Wilbur just heard *apologizing*? It couldn't be. My eyes must deceive me."

"Oh, fuck off." Wilbur jabbed, though there was no real force behind it.

Tommy paused for a long second before he whispered back, "Me too, Will."

Wilbur nodded, accepting his apology, and for once there was peace.

Right on cue, Hannah swept back into the room. Tommy wouldn't be surprised if she had been sitting outside the door, listening in as they talked. To be fair, they hadn't exactly been quiet.

"Here is our first cape, boys. Let's try on this one first and I'll put together your blue one later after we try on some tunics, okay?" Hannah strode up to Tommy and settled a massive black cape across his shoulders.

"Oh, that's perfect!" She cried, turning him around to face Wilbur, "Doesn't he look just darling Wilbur?"

Tommy didn't think it was perfect. He could barely move with all the thick fabric weighing him down. His head just barely peeked over the collar of it. He told Hannah as much. "Lady, this is wayyy too big."

“You’ll grow into it.” Hannah replied, smoothing out the wrinkles in the fabric.

“Techno will love it.” Wilbur added with a soft grin, “We’ll take it.”

“Wonderful.” Hannah sang, clapping her hands together, “Follow me Will and we’ll get your tab all settled, yeah? We can pick out what else you’d like me to tailor.”

Wilbur nodded, pushing himself out of his chair and trailing after her. “I’ll be right back, okay Tommy? Stay here.”

With that, Wilbur and Hannah disappeared into the back room and Tommy was left, draped in heavy clothes, alone on the pedestal in the boutique. He went to shrug off the cloak and hesitated. Wilbur’s order echoed in his mind.

They’d finally reached an understanding of sorts. Did he really want to disobey the first order the man gave? To shatter their truce so quickly?

No. He would stand here and wait, even if the clothes were smothering and thick and so hot he thought he might melt. He’d deal. There were worse things in life than waiting in a high-end boutique for designer clothes.

To distract himself he stared out the window at the ocean of people passing by. A woman strolled by holding a kid on either side. A tiny metal cart loaded with fruits hovered just above the crowd, weaving around market stalls and stray clotheslines. And...

What the fuck. There, there out in the streets...

Purple. Familiar purple. A purple that he had seen almost every week for years, a purple that he had come to absolutely despise. And it was here. In the Depths.

Tommy was out the door and chasing after it before he could second guess himself.

The crowd was far less merciful without the figures of the gang surrounding him. There was no bubble of space, no more lingering glances: he was just another common kid on the streets, unnoticeable and insignificant, and the crowd descended on him in a frenzy of elbows and shoves and stiff boots that crushed his toes. That little flash of purple was lost in an instant in the midst of it, swallowed by the crowd.

Tommy ducked under another elbow, dodged another couple strolling past him, and--there. Another blip of purple, another flash of pale blond hair not twenty meters off, and then it was gone again, disappearing into the sea of colors.

Tommy pushed against the river of people toward the last spot he had seen it, and so it continued. Push and pull. Spotting it and losing it again.

The cape wasn’t doing him any favors either. As he suspected, all it did was hinder his progress, getting caught or tangled in literally everything it possibly could. Maybe it was fine for Technoblade and the rest of the gang to prance around the streets in their thick, heavy cloaks, but that was only because they were, you know, a *gang*. Everyone knew who they were and everyone stayed out of their way. Tommy didn’t exactly have that same luxury.

But he still kept shoving his way through stray limbs and clumps of people, fighting towards the spot, catching sight of the blip of purple and then losing it again, sometimes close enough that he was almost able to reach out and touch it before it vanished back into the crowd. Over and over, time and time again he failed to reach it, yet he kept going, kept pushing through the horde, because he knew that purple. And he couldn’t quite dare to believe that...that it was him. But he had to know for sure.

The spot of purple appeared again, not two meters away and, desperately, Tommy lunged for it.

His hand closed around a purple hoodie. Its owner glanced over his shoulder.

They locked eyes.

Tommy blinked. "*Purpled?*"

Purpled. Of course it was Purpled.

"Tommy. Oh." Purpled replied like he had just met Tommy on some casual stroll and not after Tommy had chased him through the streets of an illicit subterranean city. "Hi. What's up dude?"

What's up dude? *What's up dude?* That was all he had to say?

"You--what the fuck are you doing here?"

Purpled shrugged. He *shrugged*. "I have a business to run Tommy. Can't always be topside, y'know."

"But--you knew about this place?" he gaped, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Figured you knew about it." Purpled said absentmindedly, turning down another alleyway, "Y'know, with you being Theseus and all."

Tommy's heart skipped a beat. "What did you say."

Purpled just smirked at Tommy over his shoulder. His eyes were lit with devious glee.

"Purpled." Tommy said slowly, "How did you know that?"

Purpled rolled his eyes. "I've been working with you for the last three years, Tommy. I'm not an idiot."

"You knew." Tommy whispered, letting it sink in. Purpled knew he was Theseus. He had the capability to expose the secret Tommy had spent the last three years hiding.

He had the capability to ruin Tommy's life.

"The entire time?" Tommy asked shakily.

"Well. It was more like after you asked about Fundy." Purpled told him, "And then his ring got stolen? And then Wilbur was in an unusually good mood for an entire week? It was more of that. Biggest red flag ever, dude."

"But--what the *fuck*, Purpled." Tommy snapped. How could he just brush this off?

Purple grinned. "My guy, chill out. You look like you've seen a ghost."

"*How?*" He had to know. What, had Purpled broken into his apartment? Hacked his computer? How had he done it? It couldn't have just been the Fundy thing.

Purpled just shrugged again. "Word gets around down here Tommy. I have my ways."

Tommy grit his teeth. "Purpled, I swear to Prime, if you don't give me a straight answer, I'll--"

"What, Tommy?" Purpled said, his grin lined with a razor edge, "You'll what? I could leave you for a second and you'd be lost to the crowd. Face it, up there you might be the big man of the Underground, but down

here..."

His arms spread wide. "This is my domain. I know more than you might think."

"Fine." Tommy muttered, "Fine. But this isn't over."

Purpled's face, for once, dropped its snarky grin. His violet eyes went a shade sharper than they ever had before. "Yes, Theseus, it is. Now, where do you want to go?"

"Uh, about that, actually." Tommy chuckled sheepishly, "I'm lost."

They ended up in a shop that looked eerily similar to the one Purpled had on the surface, decorated with the same obnoxious purple, displaying all the same traps.

Tommy skimmed a hand over a collection of flash bangs, the same models that he had bought from Purpled not two months earlier. "So you really just sell the same stuff down here as up there? This is just like an offshoot of your main business?"

Purpled laughed. "If anything the surface store is the offshoot."

Tommy looked up from where he was inspecting a new model of bear trap. "Why so?"

"Well, down here...there's less surveillance, you know. I've...expanded my services a bit."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Tommy asked, arching an eyebrow.

"You know, bounty hunting, search and retrieval, the occasional assassination." Purpled shrugged, "Odds and ends."

Tommy gaped. "You're an assassin."

"I prefer the term 'fixer'." Purpled corrected nonchalantly, like he wasn't admitting to murdering people for cash. Tommy wasn't one to judge, hell, he himself plotted and stole for a living, but that didn't seem like something you were just supposed to admit outright.

Then again, Purpled had always been one to ignore the risks.

A phone rang from somewhere deeper in the shop and Purpled pivoted, strolling into a back room.

"Speaking of which, I gotta take that. Stay here."

Which, again, was an instruction Tommy fully intended on listening to. He didn't need to get lost again, and all the tech Purpled had in the shop was cool as shit. He could wait a little longer to find his way back to the gang.

Of course, not two seconds after Purpled had swept out of the room, Philza burst through the door.

His voice was frantic, his movements hurried and wild. "Purpled, I need your help, I lost my kid and--"

Philza's eyes met his and he froze, "Oh. Tommy."

There was a millisecond where the two were frozen in shock, just looking at each other. Philza was the first to recover.

"Tommy." he gasped, and then Phil was across the room and there were calloused hands running across the sides of his face, skimming over his arms, checking him for injuries, "Where have you been? Wilbur's

worried sick. Technoblade's practically shaking the entire city down. Mate, where were you? Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"Philza." Tommy said dumbly. A calm hand ran through his hair. "Yeah, I'm fine."

Phil chuckled, pulling Tommy into his chest. Tommy froze, standing there limply as Philza's arms circled around him. He was...hugging him?

It was nice.

"Prime, mate, we'd thought someone had snatched you or something. You sure you're alright? I can call our medic to come patch you up--"

Of course, it was that instant Purpled chose to reappear, strolling out of the back room with a practiced grin. "Hey Mr. Philza. I assume you're here for him?"

Philza pulled back from the hug. Tommy fought the urge to reach for him to come back. "That, uh. That'd be correct."

"Great. I'll give him back for two thousand Primes." Purpled announced with a businessman's smile.

He paused to consider before amending: "No, wait, three."

Phil blinked. "Purpled, I'm not paying for you to give me my--"

And then it hit Tommy that Philza and Purpled hadn't introduced themselves to each other. Yet they were still talking casually. And calling each other by name.

Well, fuck.

"Wait a minute. Back the hell up." Tommy blurted, "You two know each other?"

Purpled smirked at him. Tommy tried to contain the urge to sock him across the face. "I told you I had my ways, Tommy. Meet way number one."

Tommy's gaze flashed over to Philza, who looked equally as baffled as Tommy, head tilt and all.

"You two...you know each other too?" He asked Tommy, "I thought you hadn't been to the Depths. How do you know Purpled?"

"He's my gear dealer up on the topside. But you didn't answer my question, how do *you* know him Philza?" Tommy said, narrowing his eyes at Phil, "Thought you were all about snatching up children in the Antarctic gang. Thought you all just loved kidnapping kids that were just minding their own business? Huh? How come he's still out and about if you both knew each other?"

Purpled gave him a look of incredulity, "I'm not the only one?"

Tommy nodded and he and Purpled shared a knowing glance. This, at least, they could agree on. Phil had a knack for picking up children, and it was annoying as fuck.

Phil just laughed. "Trust me, I've tried. He works with us, so we've settled on giving him a few extra paydays."

"Whatever keeps you off my back, old man." Purpled grumbled.

"Now that I think about it though, maybe we *should* just let you starve..." Phil retorted with mock-seriousness.

Purpled's smile fell. "Oh, uh, haha, what I meant was thank you so much for your generous payments Mr. Philza, sir."

Phil chuckled at him, waving off his antics before he turned back to Tommy. "You ready to go mate? We should probably get back before Techno shuts down the entire city."

"Yeah, sure, but..." Tommy hesitated. He still had business with Purpled, business he didn't want Philza to be privy to. "Can you just give me one minute?"

Phil raised an eyebrow but obliged. "I'll be outside."

The instant Phil's wings disappeared out the door, Tommy spun on Purpled, snatching a lethally sharp knife from a nearby display and lunging at Purpled. An instant later, Purpled was pressed up to the wall with a knife to his throat. He looked unsurprisingly calm about it.

"You work for them." Tommy snarled.

Purpled tried to shrug and winced as the blade dug deeper into his throat. "I prefer work *with* them, actually. But yes."

Tommy leaned closer. A thin trail of red snaked down Purpled's neck. "Don't mess with me, Purpled, not right now. What did you tell them?"

Pure, unfiltered shock flashed across Purpled's face, so authentic that for a second even Tommy believed the innocent act.

"What?" Purpled asked, sounding affronted.

Like Tommy was going to fall for his farce. Purpled was a businessman. He did whatever it took to make some quick cash, and selling out Theseus? That would be the quickest money of all.

"What did you tell them about me? You said you knew I was Theseus. You work for them. What did you tell them? Huh?" Tommy snapped, half-wondering if he was about to rack up his second murder, "I have people out there, people I need to protect. Tell me what you know, or I swear. I swear I'll..."

Genuine hurt flickered in Purpled's eyes. His mouth tilted downward into a frown. "Put the knife down Tommy. I didn't tell them anything. I run a business. Patient confidentiality."

The offense showing on his face was enough to convince Tommy. Purpled might not care about Tommy, but he did care about his business, and selling Theseus out certainly wouldn't help his reputation.

So Tommy pulled away, scowling at him. "Fine. But this isn't over Purpled. You owe me one."

Purpled rubbed aggressively at the cut on his throat. "I don't owe anyone *anything*."

The door slammed shut behind him.

Philza met him outside, leading him back through the streets to where he said Wilbur and Techno would meet them. The entire way he refused to let go of Tommy's hand.

A little unnecessary, but whatever. Tommy had been the one to run off, he wasn't really in a position to argue if Philza wanted to prevent him from getting lost again.

Though if Tommy thought that reaction was bad, Wilbur and Techno's were so much worse.

He saw Wilbur first, namely because he turned around and suddenly the man was inches away and swooping him into a tight hug.

“Tommy,” Wilbur gasped, “Prime, where have you *been*?”

Geez, these people were clingy. He had been gone for two hours tops, it wasn't like he had been missing for days or anything. This sort of felt like an overreaction.

Wilbur didn't wait for him to answer, scanning over him for injuries just like Phil. “You’re okay? You’re alright? Prime, I left for one minute and then you were just *gone*, and I thought I had let you be--I thought--”

Philza cut in. “He’s alright, Will. Found him with Purpled.”

Wilbur released Tommy from his suffocating death grip, glancing up at the man with shock. “Purpled? How the hell did Purpled find him?”

Phil laughed. “From the way I understand it, *he* found *Purpled*.”

Wilbur opened his mouth to reply and that was when Technoblade appeared.

“Theseus!” He shouted as he spotted Tommy, “Kid, I told you to stay nearby.”

His hand settled on Tommy’s head, ruffling his hair.

“I really didn’t mean to--” Tommy spotted something bright red dotting the white tunic under Techno's cape and his eyes went wide, “Is that blood?”

“Maybe.” Techno said in a way that was not at all reassuring.

Tommy stared at him. “Why--Techno, why do you have blood on your shirt?”

Techno turned away, avoiding the question. “Let’s go home.”

As the days went on, Tommy began to develop a routine.

In the mornings he would crawl out of his bed just in time to join the gang for breakfast, now with all members present, before they each went their separate ways. Most days Tommy would tag along with Techno, curling up in the library and tackling books on mythology and then fables and then classic literature. The classics were particularly challenging with their flowery words and jumbled dialogue, and Tommy nearly gave up on half the books (like Hamlet, which mysteriously found its way into the fireplace) before Techno stepped in, teaching him what the more difficult words meant and guiding him through the ancient phrasing.

Sometimes, however, Techno wasn’t there. He just disappeared, was off doing ‘work’ according to Philza, and on those days Tommy sought out Wilbur instead.

The two of them weren’t quite comfortable with each other yet, even after their talk in Hannah’s, but there wasn’t the same stifling tension between them as before. They would sit in the kitchen or a lounge and talk, and though their conversations weren’t without jabs, there was nothing cruel about them either. Sometimes, when he got tired of talking he would ask Wilbur to do other things: to take him back into the city, to show him how to use a compound bow, to show him his guitar.

Despite Tommy’s requests Wilbur never took him back out into the city, not after that first day, but sometimes if Tommy asked real nice he would open the kitchen door to the elevator and let Tommy sit next to the window, watching the dots of movement in the streets below. On good days Wilbur would let him stay

there for hours, just looking down at the city. On better days, Wilbur would scoot away from the kitchen table and sit next to him on the floor until the city stilled and Tommy fell asleep on his shoulder.

In the afternoons, Tommy would meet in the west wing with Philza. The two of them had come to an unspoken agreement at some point as the days went by--Tommy left Philza alone in the mornings when he was in his office working, and, in return, Philza would spend his time in the afternoon teaching Tommy.

It wasn't always the same thing--some days, they went to the garden and Phil would pretend to be mad when Tommy inevitably abandoned gardening in favor of chasing bugs around the yard or climbing the oak tree. Other days he would try to teach him how to cook (the kitchen was coated in flour for a week) or mend clothes (*I mean, I've sewn together wounds, Phil, isn't that basically the same thing?*) or cut his hair (when Philza showed up with a pair of scissors he was met with an hour and a half worth of protest before he just gave up.)

Little by little, Tommy began to trust them. And not just that but like them too. Which was terrifying and against the very fundamentals of his nature, but it happened nonetheless.

And then, after two weeks of the most peace he had ever experienced, Tommy got bored.

Or more accurately, he got restless.

He might've been with the gang for months, but before that he had been on the streets for nine years, and alone for the majority of them. He couldn't just ignore that there was still a life out there in East Side, waiting for him--more specifically, he couldn't ignore that there was a destiny waiting out there for him.

Theseus. His namesake. He'd spent years cultivating it, building up his reputation as infallible, unshakeable, unstoppable, and now he'd been offline from his account for more than two months. Surely people had begun to think that he was dead or detained. Surely his clients were beginning to lose their faith. And here he was, sitting on his ass and reading.

As much as he liked it, the quiet, the peace of his life with the gang, he had to accept the truth: Theseus was crumbling and he was ignoring it.

Once he was healed and the gang let him go back to his life on the surface he'd need to do a lot of work to handle all the damage his absence had done. He couldn't get too complacent. He needed to be getting stronger. Getting ready.

He needed to train. And Tommy knew there was one person who could help him.

Technoblade.

"Can I train with you?" he asked the next day, cornering Techno in his training room.

"Not yet, kid. You're still injured." Techno replied, not breaking his movements as he slashed his sword at different training dummies, "Give it a few weeks."

So, of course, Tommy found him again the next day.

"Hey Techno! Whatcha doing?" he chirped.

Techno raised an eyebrow. "Go bother Wilbur."

And then the day after that:

"Technoblade! My man! My absolute favorite! How are you, big man?"

Technoblade narrowed his eyes at him. “No.”

And so it continued. Tommy was nothing if not persistent.

It took two whole weeks of Technoblade adamantly refusing to train him before Tommy decided on another tactic: target the weak link.

So he went to Philza, marching up to him one morning as he sat in his office.

“Philza, I want to spar.”

Phil glanced up from the stack of papers on his desk. “What did Techno say?”

“He said I was still too hurt, but I could probably--” Philza gave him a look, and Tommy reconsidered his previous statement. “He said no.”

“Then no.”

Tommy threw his arms in the air, gesturing at himself. “But Philza, I’m totally fine, look at me. Everything barely even hurts at all. I’m perfectly fine. I want to train.”

Phil sighed, going back to his paperwork with a shake of his head, “Sorry, if Techno said no then the answer is no.”

“But...” Fuck, he was going to have to pull out the big guns. “Please, Phil?”

The man had been asking for Tommy to call him Phil instead of Philza for weeks now. Something about how Tommy didn't need to be formal around him or some shit. Tommy had been saving the first name card for something big, and this was it.

Just as he expected, Phil unsuccessfully tried to stifle his smile, his eyes shining. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Phil.” Techno deadpanned. Tommy watched from his hiding spot just outside the door.

Philza’s voice was pleading, “Techno, he said my name, we made *progress*--”

“Phil, you didn’t.” Tommy could hear the exasperation ringing through his voice. “I told you he needed at least another week. His arm is still fragile, he probably still can’t even breathe properly with those ribs.”

“Techno, can’t you just go easy on him?”

“That’s not how it works Phil and you know it.” Techno grumbled. Tommy punched the air. He could almost hear Techno's resolve breaking.

“Techno.” Phil's voice went hard, “Train him.”

Technoblade just sighed. “If he breaks another rib it’s on you.”

Techno tapped his ankle with the blunt end of his sword. “Widen your stance. That’s the most important thing. Your balance comes from your feet.”

Tommy scowled, shifting his feet. He wouldn't have asked Techno to train him if he knew it was going to be so mind-numbingly boring. He wanted to *fight*. Not just stand around and talk about how his feet needed to be an inch further apart.

Techno paced around him, continuing the lecture. “You’re used to fighting fast on your feet. Scrappy. It’s not a bad strategy for someone with your strength--”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Tommy snapped, feeling a little bit offended by Technoblade calling his fighting style 'scrappy'. It wasn't *scrappy*. It was just...aggressive.

Techno gave him an unimpressed look. “You’re small, kid. No offense, but you’re not exactly going to push anyone around like that.”

“I take great offense at that. I could take you any day.” Tommy boasted.

“Oh.” Technoblade said slowly, dangerously, “Really?”

Tommy swallowed. Maybe he should’ve considered those words before they came out of his mouth, but it was too late to take them back now. He puffed up his chest. “I’ll take you right now, bitch. Right now.”

“You’re injured. I don’t fight someone when they’re down.”

“Sounds to me like you’re scared.” Tommy taunted and Technoblade rolled his eyes. Clearly Tommy’s strategy of goading him into a real spar was not working. Technoblade was as emotionless as ever.

The man tapped his sword against the training mat, grabbing Tommy’s attention. “Kid, I’m not insulting you. Fast is good. Not the issue here. You wanted to spar, right? I’m just helping you to polish things up.”

“Fine.” Tommy snapped, “Let’s spar then. We’ll see.”

Technoblade retreated to the other side of the training mat, tossing his sword to the side of the ring. “Today we’re gonna take it slow, okay? Take your stance.”

“Wait wait wait, hold up, aren’t we gonna use weapons?” Tommy asked. He wasn’t an idiot. He wouldn’t stand a chance against Techno in hand to hand combat.

“Take a practice sword then.” Technoblade replied, but Tommy shook his head. He wasn't used to wielding swords, they were far too clunky and impractical for life on the streets. He had something else in mind.

He shifted on his feet. “Can--can I have my staff back?”

“Your staff.” Technoblade replied stonily.

“It’s like a thin, metal rod.” Tommy told him.

Technoblade huffed. “I know what a staff is, kid.”

“Can I have it back? It was a gift.” Tommy asked and with a sigh Technoblade caved, trudging out of the room and coming back two minutes later holding Tommy's silver staff, the one he had gotten from Sam all those years ago.

“Don’t understand why you’d wanna fight with this piece of garbage but go for it.” He tossed Tommy the staff and Tommy cradled it in his arms, looking down at it lovingly. What could he say, he was attached. That thing had got him out of a lot of sticky situations, and now it was going to help him beat Technoblade.

“Garbage?” Tommy said with a grin, pressing the button on the handle of his staff. It crackled, lighting up with blue lightning.

Techno took a step back from the staff, eyeing it warily. “New rule. No electricity.”

“What?” Tommy protested, “But that makes everything so much more fun!”

“No.”

“Fine. Let’s go then.” Tommy demanded.

Techno narrowed his eyes. “Remember. Slow.”

They took position on either side of the training mat. Techno stood stock still like one of his training dummies, holding out his sword to let Tommy have the first strike. And who was Tommy to turn down a free swing? If Technoblade was going to just give him an advantage, of course Tommy was going to take it.

He lunged suddenly, swinging his staff wildly at Techno and the man stepped just out of his reach with a grunt. “I said take it slow kid.”

Tommy grinned over his staff. “This *is* slow.”

And then he dove back in, slashing and hacking and swinging, Techno blocking every blow and then returning his own, slowly increasing their pace.

All things considered, they seemed almost evenly matched. Techno landed more strikes on him, sure, but Tommy got in his fair share as well. Techno must have realized it too because he went on the offensive, moving toward him.

A hit, then another, picking up speed as Tommy blocked each blow. He wasn’t even sure Techno realized his strikes were getting faster, more intense, that at some point a switch had flipped and suddenly ‘taking it slow’ had become a full-on spar. Case in point: Techno’s sword arcing towards his neck.

Tommy ducked under it, sweeping his staff at Techno’s ankles in turn. It was quick enough that Techno didn’t have the time to block, not with the momentum of his sword still swiping above Tommy’s head.

The blow struck home, not nearly with enough force to knock the man over, but just enough that his left knee buckled. His feet shifted with the movement, the grip on his sword loosening ever so slightly, and Tommy saw his chance.

This was his game: misdirection. Techno was a brick wall--no way was Tommy taking him out on brute force alone. No, he had to be much more strategic than that if he wanted to stand a chance, striking scattered hits across his body, dancing just out of reach of his heavy swings, waiting for a chance to catch him off balance.

So when Techno’s grip loosened just ever so slightly on his wooden sword Tommy went for the kill, slashing his staff towards Techno’s right wrist in an attempt to disarm him.

Techno recovered far quicker than he expected, grip tightening the instant he noticed Tommy’s staff heading his way and blocking with such force that they both stumbled away from each other, pushing then to the edges of the mat. It was the first lull in action in the entire spar.

They circled each other once more. Tommy struggled to catch his breath. Sweat rolled down his forehead and dripped onto the training mat below. He really had lost some of his strength while he was healing. Usually he wouldn’t even break a sweat, but he sort of felt like he was dying.

Technoblade, on the other hand, was entirely, infuriatingly unphased. The only sign that he was under any strain at all was the slight flush on his cheeks, the pink flyaways poking out from his usually tight braid, and the glowing red glare he was sending Tommy’s way.

“You’re good, I’ll give you that,” he grunted, hefting his sword higher, “But not nearly good enough to beat me, kid. Why don’t you put down the staff.”

“Why? Thought we were just having a fun little training session Technoblade? What’s with the sudden change in mood?” Tommy taunted, “You wouldn’t happen to be *scared* would you?”

“Theseus. That sounds an awful lot like a challenge.” Techno replied, “You should know I don’t take kindly to those. I really don’t want to have to humiliate you here kid.”

“Who says you will? I’ve held up pretty well so far, haven’t I? Who says I won’t beat you?”

“Well, for one...” Techno trailed off suggestively, like he had decided to keep the information to himself. Like he was hiding something to screw Tommy up more.

“What?” Tommy snarled, glaring at him. What, he thought he couldn’t do it? He thought Tommy couldn’t beat him? “What is it you fuckin’ coward--”

He knew he had made a mistake as soon as the word had left his mouth. Techno’s face, usually so impassive, contorted with rage. His eyes glowed neon red.

“Fine!” Techno barked, the grip on his sword tightening, “Your stance is *still* too wide!”

Tommy blinked and in the next instant Technoblade’s sword was inches away, flashing towards the side of his chest. *How--*

Tommy didn’t have the time to react, didn’t even have the time to form a coherent thought before the blunt wood smashed into his side.

In the millisecond before the pain processed Tommy felt his staff slip from his hand and spiral across the air. His feet left the training mat.

And then he was soaring and stars bloomed in his eyes and the air forced itself from his lungs in a gasp as his back hit the ground.

"Theseus!"

Someone called his name and Tommy lurched upwards, fighting to force his lungs to inhale, exhale, inhale again as air worked its way back through his chest. Technoblade was hovering above him, watching him with wide eyes, and Tommy realized he was lying on the floor.

Something warm snaked a trail from his nose to his mouth, and when he went to brush it away his hand came back red. His side pulsed with pain and when Tommy pulled up his shirt to check on it the spot Techno hit was already turning deep plum.

In his peripheral vision Techno’s eyes filled with dawning horror.

Tommy’s face split into a feral grin. “That was so cool, holy fucking shit, Techno, I’ve never seen a bruise form that fast.”

For some reason that didn’t seem to make Techno feel better.

Tommy was way too excited to care. It really had been the first time he had fought like that in a while--most of his other attempts at fighting were done alone, which sort of eliminated the intensity of his exercises, or when he was being chased down by guards, which also were experiences he wasn’t eager to repeat. Actual, challenging training with a real, live opponent...it’d been a long while since he’d gotten that. So he couldn’t help being a little eager, even if his side hurt like a bitch. He pushed himself back to his feet, practically bouncing with adrenaline, and Techno’s hand reached out to steady him. “I never get to fight like that, Blade, never. Let’s go again.”

"No." Techo said quickly. His voice wobbled at the end, just barely noticeable. "No, not today."

"Tomorrow?" Tommy asked.

The hope in his voice was a tangible thing, and Techno faltered under the weight of it. "Sure, kid. Your lessons start tomorrow. 1300. Don't be late."

Tommy whooped. Mission accomplished.

One day Tommy made the mistake of showing off his bruises to Wilbur.

It was one of those breakfasts with just the two of them that morning--Techno off on some supply run in the city, Phil sequestered in his office doing paperwork--and it left an awkward hole where there was usually conversation.

Tommy didn't cope well with quiet. He filled the silence with the first that came to his mind, and that just so happened to be training with Techno.

"Have I shown you all my bruises?" He had blurted into the quiet, like an idiot, before pulling up his sleeve and pointing to a purple blotch on his forearm. "This is from when I learned how to grip a weapon."

Wilbur stared at him.

Tommy, either unphased or unobservant of the look, pulled down the collar of his shirt next to show a mottled red mark above his heart. "This is when he taught me to block!"

He pointed to his stomach. "I've got a big one there from this one time we sparred. I swear I was so close to getting him, Will. You should've seen it. My staff was like an inch away from his neck when that stupid sword came down. *So* close. I'll get him soon, though. He knows it too, he says he's not getting scared, but I know a fucking scared cat when I see one, he totally is. You can see it in his eyes, Will, he knows I'm--"

"Tommy." Wilbur said, calm in a way that made Tommy's mouth snap shut, "You got these from Techno?"

And then Tommy finally had the sense to actually look up at Wilbur's expression. Carefully controlled, his mouth pressed into a firm line.

Oh. Oh no. He wasn't sure what exactly he had done, but somehow, somehow, he had messed up. Wilbur was pissed.

So he backtracked. Damage control.

"I mean, well, Techno's been teaching me to spar, yeah, but a lot of it is really my fault, I'm not paying attention or something, it's really not--"

"Tommy." Wilbur repeated, a little too quietly, "Are those from Technoblade?"

Tommy froze. "Yes..?"

Something stormy settled in the depths of Wilbur's eyes.

"Okay," he replied, still in that terrifyingly too-calm tone, "Thank you for telling me that Tommy."

Stiffly, robotically, he pushed himself back from the table, stood, and marched out of the kitchen without so much as another glance in Tommy's direction.

“Good talk.” Tommy muttered as the door slid shut, and that was the last Tommy saw of Wilbur for hours. He all but vanished for the rest of the day, no matter how hard Tommy searched for him.

Until, that was, the door to the training room slid open in the middle of his and Techno’s training session that afternoon at the worst possible moment imaginable: Tommy flat on his back, breathing heavy, Technoblade standing above him with a blunt wooden sword pointed at his chest. They had just finished a sparring match, one Tommy had lost, and of course that was the instant Wilbur decided to pop in for a visit.

It was safe to say he did not take it well.

“Techno,” he snapped, striding across the room and snatching the sword from his hand, “What the *fuck* are you doing?”

Techno’s eyebrows furrowed, his lips tilting into a frown, “The kid wanted to train. What’s the problem?”

“What’s the problem?” Wilbur whispered, “*What’s the problem?* Techno, have you *seen* him?”

Something clicked, a switch flipped. Techno’s gaze swung to Tommy. The air in the room darkened.

“Tommy.” Techno said slowly, “What is Wilbur talking about?”

“I have no idea.”

“He’s all roughed up.” Wilbur informed him, his arms crossed over his chest, “He was showing me his bruises over *breakfast*, like they were some sort of fucking trophy. What the *fuck*, Techno.”

“He--” Techno spun on him, “You said you were fine! You said you weren’t getting hurt at all!”

“I don’t see why it’s such a big deal.” Tommy grumbled, “It’s just a few bruises, Techno. They barely even hurt.”

“There’s not supposed to be any bruises! You’re supposed to be healing! You know that.”

Tommy crossed his arms over his chest, glaring at a spot on the floor. “You didn’t seem to care much when you smacked me across the room on our first day.”

“You did *what?*” Wilbur shrieked, his voice jumping up half an octave.

“It was an accident!”

“That’s it.” Wilbur snapped, snatching the staff from Tommy’s hand, “No more training for you.”

No more training? He needed to train! How the hell else was he supposed to get ready for East Side?

“What? That’s not fair! Techno!” Tommy screeched.

“Don’t look at me, kid. You brought this on yourself.” Techno shot him a scolding glare, “You’ll train again once you’re healed. Fully.”

“Wh--what the hell else am I supposed to do then?” Tommy shouted, “You dickheads won’t let me fucking leave! You want me to just sit around here all day doing nothing?”

“Should have thought about that before you hid the bruises, kid.” Techno said and Tommy flipped him off, “You need time to recover. If we don’t know you’re hurt we can’t help you. Tell us next time, okay?”

Techno stalked out of the room.

“Fine.” Tommy snapped, “I’ll just go stare at the fucking ceiling or something.”

He turned to leave. Maybe he would go read or something for the gazillionth hour. Or find something to break. Whatever.

“Well, actually...” Wilbur said slowly from behind him. Mischief painted his voice, catching Tommy's attention, “There is one other thing we could do.”

“One other thing” ended up being taking Tommy to the firing range and teaching him how to shoot. Which, don't get him wrong, was totally epic and literally so cool, but Tommy was a little bit nervous about shooting after his last experience with the firing range where he shot a hole in the ceiling. Clearly, it wasn't as simple as point and shoot.

“A pistol will be a good start. A rifle's going to be way too hard to carry around and a revolver will have too much kick. How about....here.” Wilbur rambled, depositing a pistol in his hand and then picking up one of his own. He was clearly excited to teach Tommy, standing shoulder to shoulder with him, sending eager smiles his way.

Tommy tried his best to mirror his excitement.

Wilbur aimed his pistol downrange. Tommy lifted his gun, matching his movements. “First rule of guns-- you aim to kill. Don't point it at anything or anyone, unless you're ready to pull that trigger.”

“Second rule, check the chamber. You don't want to accidentally shoot anything if you're practicing your aim and trigger pull. Okay, now put your weight forward, it helps with the recoil. Arm bent, left hand under the right, there you go.”

“Now, aim down the sight. Those three dots need to line up in one straight line across the bullseye, so close one eye to focus...now, steady.” Wilbur told him and Tommy followed his direction as best as he could. Wilbur nodded his approval after a quick glance over at him, continuing his instructions, “Now, slowly, slowly, squeeze the trigger. Don't jerk it or you'll throw off your aim.”

Slowly, carefully, Tommy pulled the trigger. The gun jerked in his hand, recoiling, but not nearly as bad as last time.

Tommy glanced up at his shot. It sat on the outer edge of the target, just barely on the edge of the paper.

He hadn't even hit one of the rings of the target. Prime, that sucked. A lot of good a gun would do him if he only shot half a foot off of an enemy's face. He'd never stand a--

“Tommy, well done!” Wilbur cheered, “That's wonderful!”

Tommy scowled. “Don't sugar coat it Will, I didn't even hit the target.”

“Well, I'm proud of you.” Wilbur replied, “That's amazing for your first try.”

Something warm and bright swelled up in Tommy's chest.

One week and half a dozen shooting lessons later, Tommy hit his first bullseye.

Something was wrong.

Tommy had felt it all week, the strange tension that had built in the base. Something was up and he was sick of trying to figure it out.

It had started when he had gone to Wilbur for their now-daily shooting sessions only to find the armory completely empty. Fine, whatever, Wilbur had work to do and had just forgotten to tell him he was cancelling. Oh well. He would just go read with Techno instead.

Except the library was empty too. And the garden. And the training room. And Phil's office. He spent the rest of the afternoon milling around the base, hoping to catch sight of them without much luck.

Whatever. They were busy men. They had work. No big deal.

And then he didn't see them the next day either. At that point, Tommy was starting to get a little panicked.

Until, that is, the third day came around and Tommy actually saw Wilbur walking through the halls.

"Wilbur, what gives!" he had hollered, racing up to the man, "Where have you guys been?"

"Sorry Tommy," The man replied stonily, "I have some work to do. I'll talk to you later." And then he was gone without so much as a glance Tommy's way.

He found Technoblade hunched over his desk later that afternoon.

All he had said was, "Not right now, kid." Then he had kicked Tommy out.

Phil was the same. A single "Sorry mate, I have some paperwork." and Tommy was back to being alone.

Not once had all three of them ever skipped out on him. Not once. That was how he knew something was wrong.

He figured it would blow over, figured it was some sort of gang business. So he waited.

But every day he tried to talk with them, and every day their response was the same. For an entire week.

So when he was sitting in the hallway reading and saw Wilbur stride by like a man on a mission, sue him, he followed after him. He knew that look in Wilbur's eyes, could see the purpose burning behind them, and after being brushed off for an entire week he didn't much care that it was a 'breach of trust' or whatever.

Damn the consequences, he was curious and angry and a little bit hurt, and he wanted to know what was happening. So yeah, he tiptoed behind him as he marched down the halls, always staying just out of Wilbur's sight.

And yeah, he lurked outside the doorway as the man marched into Phil's office and slammed his hands onto the man's desk. He was tired of being ignored. If something was going on, he wanted in.

"It's time." Wilbur gasped. From a chair on the side of the room, Techno looked up from his book. Phil jumped out of his chair.

"What's our move?" Techno asked, setting down the book and that was when Tommy knew he was on the right track. Techno only put down his books when things were getting serious.

"Tonight." Wilbur answered, "I got word, they'll be in their warehouse tonight."

"With the floor plans?"

"Yep. 2300, warehouse on the south side. Same place as always." Wilbur told him with a smug grin, "They're too predictable."

"Okay." Phil said, looking at the two of them from the head of the table, "Will, you take point with the public relations. Antfrost's little cult might be dense but even they aren't immune to your charms. See if you

can convince them to hand it over, maybe come to some sort of agreement, yeah? We're prepared to handle it if things go south, but Ant has a lot of followers so if we can let's avoid that, okay lads?"

Wilbur nodded.

Tommy was beginning to see why Phil was the head of the gang even though all three of them were technically its leaders. Phil was radiating authority and confidence. It was entirely different from the man who had spent his afternoons picking apples with Tommy.

Phil pointed to Techno next. "Tech, you back him up. I want you to be so intimidating no one even thinks about attacking Will. Meanwhile, I'll search around for their floor plans myself in a bit of a stealth operation. A little bit of insurance in case you can't convince the cult to cooperate."

Wilbur and Techno shared a glance before they turned back to Philza.

"No offense Phil, but your wings aren't exactly subtle." Technoblade told him, "I'm not sure how well a stealth operation will go."

"I'll stay grounded." Phil replied, and a burst of shock bounced through the room.

"No fucking way." Wilbur snapped at the same instant Techno protested with a single, "*Phil.*"

"I'll be fine. Go in the back way with my cloak and a knife." Pointed silence echoed through the room, clearly expressing just how confident Wilbur and Techno felt about this plan.

Phil sighed. "Boys, I'm sure I can get by on *one* mission without the wings."

Techno frowned. "You'll be entirely defenseless. If anything goes wrong, anything at all..."

"You're fucked." Wilbur added helpfully.

Phil ran a hand through his hair. "Well there's not exactly another option, is there? You know how those people are. Their promises aren't exactly ironclad. We need those floor plans. We can't concentrate all our efforts on diplomacy in case the deal goes wrong. Someone needs to be prepared to steal them."

Phil listed off the gang on one hand, counting them off. "Will, you need to be there to talk with them, you know that none of the rest of us could pull that off. Techno, you're even more noticeable than I am, and someone needs to back up Wilbur. That leaves me. There's no one else for the job."

But...there totally was. Like, very obviously. Stealing floor plans, doing stealth operations, getting away unnoticed...was he the only one who was thinking there was a pretty clear option they weren't considering? What was he, chopped liver?

Tommy waited for one of them to mention that, oh yeah, they literally had a master thief living in their immediate vicinity. That maybe they could use him instead of an unexperienced, untried, important member of their gang.

But Wilbur just shook his head, admitting defeat. "Fuck."

Well. Maybe they were just too wrapped up in all their gang business to, you know, remember that he existed.. They really seemed like they were in a pickle, huh? Good thing he was there to swoop in and save the day.

Tommy poked his head into the doorway, grinning sheepishly. "I mean, uh, there is *one* other person for the job."

Three pairs of eyes shot toward him. Tommy wiggled his eyebrows. "Heard we were stealing stuff. What do I need to do?"

There was a moment of shocked silence, a moment where they all just stared at him.

And then they burst out laughing.

They were laughing. Laughing at him.

Wilbur with his wild cackles, Philza with a condescending smile, even Technoblade was biting his lip, trying and failing to stifle an amused grin.

Something dark and hurt and biting sank into Tommy's gut, and he couldn't pinpoint quite why.

"Tommy." Wilbur crooned with a venomous grin, "You think we're going to send you into the field?"

He...he didn't know. This hadn't been what he was expecting. Doubts, sure. Questions, definitely. But not this sheer disdain.

"But...you need another person." Tommy whispered, "You said it yourself. You don't want Phil to do it."

Wilbur grinned and it was vicious. Tommy knew what was coming. He braced himself.

"And you think that means we want you out there instead?" Wilbur retorted.

And even though Tommy had prepared himself, it still felt like someone had punched him in the gut. The air left his lungs. He stared at Wilbur.

His eyes began to burn.

"Wilbur--" Phil started, a warning in his tone as something unreadable flashed over his face.

Wilbur spun on him. "What Phil, you know he needs to understand! Otherwise shit like this will just keep happening."

For just a second, Tommy thought Phil might object, might argue his case.

Phil looked away. An admission of defeat.

Wilbur turned back to face him. "You're a kid, Tommy. We're not sending you out there."

A strange pressure was building itself up in his chest. This was his namesake, his entire life purpose. And they were dismissing it without a second thought.

He--fuck it, he had sort of thought they were *friends*. He'd spent so long with them, *months* of his life, he'd thought...

It only made everything hurt that much worse.

Tommy blinked furiously, scrubbing a hand over his eyes. "You can't do that Wilbur, you fucking can't."

Wilbur threw his hands up in the air. "Tommy, I don't understand what you don't get. *We don't need you out there*. We're the Antarctic gang. We have it under control."

But--but they had just said they didn't want Phil to--? What? Why wouldn't they just let him *help*?

He met Wilbur's burning eyes for one last retort. "I'm Theseus. My entire point, my whole purpose of working for you all was to help steal stuff, and now you won't even let me do that? What the fuck."

"I'm Theseus." Tommy repeated quietly, helplessly, "You--you guys get that, right?"

"Correction," Wilbur snapped, "You *were* Theseus. Now you're ours."

Now that...that one threw him for a loop.

"That's--that's not--you can't--" Tommy gasped, "*What?*"

"Just go back to your room, okay? Take a nap or something and we'll be back before you know it." Wilbur's expression may have softened but it was still backed by an edge of steel. This wasn't a request, a suggestion made as equals.

This was an order. An order to go have time out in his room like a child.

It sort of felt like someone had stabbed him in the chest.

Tommy looked to Phil, then Techno. They both met his gaze, unwavering. It was clear they weren't going to be of any help here. No, this decision, for once, seemed to be unanimous.

He couldn't argue his way out of this one.

So Tommy pivoted on one heel without another word and stomped out the way he came.

On the way back to his room he passed the kitchen and he couldn't help himself. He hated not having the last word.

So he marched into the kitchen, picked up the vase of poppies, and threw.

It shattered against the drywall. Crushed petals littered the floor.

And then he stormed back to his room, kicked the door, and screamed.

Fuck them. Fuck them all. He didn't know how he could ever have been so stupid as to think they would understand. He never should have let his guard down. He should have shown them his skills early on, at the first sign that they thought of him as some weak, innocent child.

It all made sense now. The hesitation to show him gang business, the strange possessiveness, the frantic search for him when he left their side in the Depths. They thought--damn it, even after all this time they thought he was a fucking invalid.

How could he have been dumb enough to think more than a month of working with them would show them he was capable? Adults never learned. Of course they would think he was too helpless to work with them.

Fine. Whatever. He didn't need them anyway.

He had a place. He had a time. He had a target. That was everything he needed.

They thought he couldn't do it? Thought he was too weak to play a part in their little plan?

Fine. So be it.

He would show them. He'd spent far too long neglecting his skills anyway.

It was about time Theseus came out to play.

Chapter End Notes

no more bonding. just pain.

sorry i took a tiny break for orientation week of college. back to the regular schedule this week!

hope you all enjoyed :)) thanks for all the lovely comments as always

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Tommy shows the Antarctic gang who's boss and Wilbur does not get his redemption arc

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Escaping the base was surprisingly easy.

Tommy honestly wasn't sure why he ever thought it would be a challenge. Sure, he'd had some difficulty finding his way out when he had first been brought in by the gang, but things were different now.

The gang didn't have nearly as much surveillance on him, for one. Before, back in the beginning of it all, the scrutiny had been a constant, overwhelming presence; one of them was always shadowing him, ensuring he couldn't escape without a fight. But as the weeks had gone by and Tommy had settled in without so much as a word about leaving, their security relaxed. Even now, they didn't even bother to check in on him. Even after they'd committed the verbal equivalent of crushing all his hopes and dreams up into a little ball and lighting them on fire, they hadn't even considered that maybe they should see if he was okay.

He thought that after weeks of being pseudo-roommates and months longer of loyal employment they'd at least have the decency to do that. But as Tommy hurled vases and furniture and paintings at his walls there had only been complete, crushing radio silence. And in it's wake, an idea.

Because that was the second difference--he wasn't trapped in his room. It was clear they hadn't even considered that he might try to leave, though with his track record he had no clue why they wouldn't realize it would be one of the first things to cross his mind. It wasn't long after he stopped throwing miscellaneous objects across his room in a blind rage that the first hints of a plan began to form in his mind, and it wasn't long after that before he tried the door. He'd been sure the gang would lock his door after he stormed off, but whether through naivety or plain stupidity, they hadn't bothered. Which gave Tommy free roam of the base and everything it had to offer.

There wasn't so much as a hint of their presence, even as he snuck into the training room and snatched his staff off a shelf, even as he grabbed tools--a sturdy screwdriver, a length of rope, a tool belt--from a storage room.

They'd dropped their guard.

Tommy scoffed. Amateurs.

Not that he wanted them to catch him. He didn't. What he *wanted* was for them to respect him for the renowned thief he was instead of treating him like a child. If they caught him he wouldn't be able to show them up. So no. He didn't want them to find him roaming the halls.

Still. It would have been nice if they at least *noticed*.

He kept on high alert as he crept through the hall. A switch had been flipped, a line crossed, and this was no longer trusted territory. He wasn't civilian Tommy anymore, he was heisting Tommy, and his mind was assessing the situation as such--perhaps this was some sort of trap, a test to see if he'd comply with their orders. Perhaps they were waiting just around the next corner, condescending grins in place, weapons in

hand. Part of him, the small hurt part that still couldn't comprehend the betrayal, argued the gang wouldn't do that to him.

Tommy slapped that part of him in its metaphorical face. Reality check, he'd *already* been betrayed. There was no use denying it. He wouldn't let himself be upset or get distracted over something he should've seen coming from the first place.

Before he left, just in case he took one last detour to his room and stuffed pillows under his sheets to create a little Tommy-shaped lump under the covers of his bed. It was a flimsy illusion at best. Anyone who took a closer look would immediately realize he wasn't there.

Tommy wasn't too worried. He didn't think they would bother to check if he was alright. They were probably too busy planning their little job. Without Tommy. Because they didn't *need* him.

He wasn't bitter. He wasn't.

He'd prove them wrong. They could shove that whole *you're a useless, worthless, weak child* argument right up their asses.

...

Yeah. He'd show them.

His eyes were starting to burn again. Tommy scrubbed at them fiercely.

The kitchen. He needed to go to the kitchen. Focus on the plan.

The third difference, the most important one, was that Tommy actually knew a way out of the base this time around. Before, when he had been trapped in the white room and the base had felt like an impossible labyrinth, he'd agonized over finding its exit. He had roamed the halls for a combined eight hours in all of his escape attempts without any sign of it. Near the end, he'd begun to wonder if they just had him trapped in some endless maze of doors and hallways, whether the exit even existed.

Now he knew it did, and he knew exactly where it was. The hidden elevator behind the walls of the kitchen. That was his ticket out.

Wilbur had always been shiftier about using the opening mechanism in front of Tommy on the days he had opened up the elevator so Tommy could look out the windows, half hiding it from his sight and only using it when he was distracted, but Tommy was more perceptive than Wilbur thought. Even for those brief weeks where he thought the gang was a friend and not a foe, he had still watched. Maybe it was habit, maybe it was a sixth sense telling him he'd need to know a way out in the future, but the point was, he knew how to open it up. He'd seen the passcode when Wilbur thought he wasn't paying attention, and now it was going to serve him well.

He stepped over the remains of the broken vase as he made his way across the kitchen. His boots trampled the crushed flower petals.

Once he reached the other side he tapped the wall next to the elevator in a very specific spot precisely three times. *Rap rap rap*. A panel slid open.

From there it was simple. Type in the password (anteaterzsuck, really Wilbur? And *he* was the immature one?). Make sure all his tools were in place (emergency knives, a multitool, water rations, check). And hit the enter button.

The doors slid open.

For just a second he hesitated. There was no going back after he left. He'd ignored the gang's orders before, but nothing like this. Those had always been for self preservation. This was to make a point. He was interfering with their work. And he could do it, he knew he could, but...maybe it would be better if he just...

Wilbur's voice echoed through his mind. *And you think we would send you? We don't need you. You're a kid.*

Tommy stepped into the elevator. The door slid shut behind him.

Thus began his descent into the Depths.

The Depths was also significantly less terrifying than he thought they would be.

He'd imagined them to be pretty horrifying in the dredges of the night, pitch black and lethal, crawling with the criminals Techno had warned him about, but they actually weren't too different from what the Depths were like in the daytime.

Even during the day the Depths were dim, lit only by the glow of lanterns and flickering light bulbs, and the only difference in the night was that it was just...well...dimmer. Not quite as well-lit as before, but not dark, never black enough that he couldn't see. It couldn't be, not with the upside-down half of the city hovering above them, serving as a lamp to the entire cavern.

It was almost peaceful like this, in the gray of the night. Quiet in a way East Side never was. And without the hordes of people plaguing the streets it was much easier to navigate: when he had chased after Purpled before it was like trying to make his way through a maze. Now, he spotted a sign pointing toward the southern half of the city within minutes. By 2000 he had reached a split in the city, a gurgling river rushing through the center with a lone bridge spanning the divide.

It was...decidedly darker on the other side of the river.

Still, the south side was where this Antfrost guy's warehouse was supposedly located, and he couldn't exactly just give up now. He had a plan now, a purpose at hand, and he couldn't throw it away now. No, it was simple. He'd cross the bridge. Figure out where the warehouse was. And then he'd march right in. From there...well, he could figure it out from there. He wasn't really, exactly sure what the inside of the warehouse was going to be like. He hadn't actually gotten that much from listening in on Wilbur.

Honestly, he was sort of going in completely blind.

All he really knew for sure was his target--floor plans. How he would get them, where they were located...all of that he would just have to improvise.

It wasn't exactly a solid plan.

But it would have to do. He marched across the bridge.

Okay. So maybe Tehnoblade was right about the south side being shady.

It had been half an hour since he'd crossed the divide. Half an hour of hopeless stumbling through the significantly-darker streets, searching for and failing to find any sort of sign aiming him in the right direction. It wasn't like he thought there'd be a big neon sign pointing him exactly at Antfrost's warehouse or anything, but he had sort of hoped there'd be *something*.

He was on a schedule, after all. No time to waste.

Honestly, he'd accept anything at this point.

So when he spotted the hunched figure of a person stumbling down the other side of the street, mumbling under their breath, he didn't exactly think it through before he began half-jogging toward them and blurting out for help.

"Hey!" he shouted and the stranger's neck snapped upward, "You! Do you know where I could find this warehouse? It's owned by this guy named Antfrost."

The figure stepped closer, and that was when, a second too late, Tommy got a good look at the stranger. It was a woman, her face marred with long, jagged scars, her lips painted blood red. She was dressed in a tight skirt and blouse, her entire outfit completely, startlingly red. One of her eyes glowed crimson. Too late, Tommy took a shaky step back. The woman had already honed in on him, her mouth stretching into a predatory smile. "You dare speak his name? Scum like you? What would *you* need with His Highness?"

Oh. Oh fuck. Why hadn't he noticed the flat-out scary aura around this lady before he had shouted at her? He had a sinking feeling he might have just met his first member of Antfrost's cult.

"Business. You wouldn't understand," he replied, putting on a confident front, "Now, lady, point me to His Highness's warehouse. Please."

"Oh you poor child," the woman just simpered, "Antfrost is going to feed you to the rats."

Oh.

Okay, that was it. Why the hell was he listening to this? He didn't need to talk things out. He didn't need to negotiate. He had a fucking taser staff, and this lady didn't have anything.

She was still rambling. "--imagine them nibbling through your clothes, your skin, slurping up your blood--"

Tommy Innett, admittedly, was not a patient person. Before he could second guess himself his staff was two inches away from the woman's neck, crackling with electricity.

The woman, as crazy as she seemed, had enough self preservation not to move.

"Okay," Tommy snarled, "Now, let's try this again. Where. Is. The. Warehouse."

The woman's throat bobbed.

Tommy grinned.

Tommy had found the warehouse, had all of his gear ready, and still, he hesitated.

There were two guards at the entrance of the building and no other viable entrances, yet another obstacle he needed to get through, and after a long night of running around the city he was *tired*. He hadn't slept or eaten in the last twenty four hours. He was too preoccupied with planning, not to mention the *emotional* toll the day had taken.

It was a lot. He needed time to psych himself up a little bit.

So that was how he ended up there, leaning against the brick wall of an alleyway a hundred meters away, closing his eyes and taking deep, steeling breaths.

It was fine. It was *fine*. He was calm and cool and collected and he was going to absolutely *rock* this Antfrost fella's shit and then he'd go home and Wilbur and Techno and Phil would all apologize and--

Something brushed against his leg and Tommy was snapped out of the daydream with a startled screech, jumping back from it. His staff was in his hand in an instant, sparking with blue lightning, snapping out towards something tan and brown and...fuzzy?

The animal stared back up at him. It blinked.

Tommy's staff fizzled out. He stashed it back into his tool belt.

A...cat? Tommy crouched down next to it, momentarily forgetting that he was about to march into a warehouse to steal from a cult leader.

"What the hell are you doing here little guy?" Tommy asked them, scratching under the cat's chin. He'd always had a bit of a soft spot for animals, especially strays. That was irony, he supposed, a stray with a fondness for strays, but he just couldn't help it. Whenever he had extra food (and sometimes even when he didn't) he always left out a bowl of scraps for them in East Side, causing the strays to flock to Bad and Skeppy's bakery. The cats especially had taken a liking to him: over the years he'd taken care of everything from a litter of tabby cat kittens, to a grumpy black Persian, to a fluffy Maine Coon. This one was Siamese by the looks of it, tan with dark spots around their eyes, and especially friendly for a stray by the way it was rubbing up against his leg affectionately. Despite Wilbur, despite *everything*, he couldn't help but smile.

"Hi there." Tommy whispered, giving up on any pretense of still watching the warehouse and settling down onto the pavement. He was ahead of schedule anyway. He could spare a few minutes. It would be good to have some time to ground himself anyway.

The cat's fur was soft under his calloused palms and he ran his hands through it gently, scratching under the animal's chin. They squeaked out a happy little meow in response, their chest rumbling out a purr as they pushed themselves further into his hand.

"I *could* make a pussy joke right now." Tommy muttered under his breath to the little thing, grinning cheekily, and the cat yowled at him, swatting at his hand with their claws. Tommy jerked back, laughing. "But I won't! I won't. Geez, some cats just can't take a joke these days, huh?"

The cat clearly did not take kindly to the snark. It went from clawing at his hand to full-on pouncing on his wrist, nipping at the edges of his suit. This time Tommy drew back quicker, more alarmed.

He tugged at the edge of his suit, pointing a scolding finger at the cat. "Hey! Hey, not the finery, kitty. I had to get all dressed up for this thing, I'm not letting it go to waste. This is the nicest shit I've worn in years. Look at this, I got the dress pants, the suit jacket. The whole shabang."

Tommy really had dressed up to the nines. He figured there'd probably be some sort of dress code for whatever important cult meeting he was about to walk into, and though his regular heisting clothes were infinitely more comfortable (and useful, he might add) it was worth sacrificing them if he could blend in. The last thing he needed was to draw attention, and now that he had a full wardrobe at his disposal it seemed pointless not to take advantage of it. He was decked out in a sharp red suit jacket with a pressed black button down underneath and long, slim pants that hid his sturdy set of boots from sight.

He'd forgone a cape. Just one last *fuck you*.

The cat, to their credit, seemed to pick up on his change in mood, giving up on trying to gnaw off his arm and climbing up into his lap instead. A wet, pink nose pressed up against his cheek, sniffing curiously.

"Awww, you're a sweetie aren't you?" Tommy cooed, scratching around the cat's ears. It hit him suddenly that he'd been calling the animal 'cat' in his mind the entire time, and fought to keep himself from naming them. Wasn't naming wild animals supposed to be bad? You weren't supposed to get emotionally attached to strays, that much he knew. No, no, it was best if he just set the cat down and got on with the job. He didn't need any more problems on his hands, didn't need yet another responsi--.

A scratchy tongue lapped his cheek affectionately.

Fuck it. He was already attached. Might as well seal the deal. “What’s your name, huh Cat? What should I call you?”

The cat peered up at him with wide, clever eyes.

“I think...how about Clementine?” Tommy offered and he could have sworn the cat physically recoiled at the words, its eyes narrowing.

Tommy chose to take it as a sign of pleasant shock instead of disgust. He grinned down at her. “You like that, cat? Clementine?”

Clementine yelped at him. Tommy tried to pet her again, to settle her down, and she did that little head dodge thing cats always did when they were irritated. Her ears flared back, her teeth baring.

“I think you like it, huh?” Tommy replied. Clementine snarled.

Tommy frowned, “Now, Clementine don’t get snappy with me.”

Clementine hissed (out of affection) and bit his finger hard enough to draw blood. Tommy patted her head. “You definitely like it. I’m sure that was just a...love bite.”

It was most definitely not a love bite. Clementine hissed again. Tommy chose to ignore it.

The tiny watch on his wrist, one Tommy had stolen from the base’s supply closet, began to beep.

2100.

Shit. Two hours. He only had two hours until the gang would arrive at the warehouse, sooner if they noticed he was missing and figured out his plan. He needed to be in and out with those plans by 2300.

“Ugh. I need to go, Clem.” Tommy groaned, going to lift Clementine off his lap, “They’ll be starting soon. I can’t be late.”

At the movement, Clementine suddenly seemed to have a change of heart from her earlier tantrum, settling stubbornly into his lap.

“Clem, I’m sorry. I need to go girl.” Tommy told her, trying to nudge her off of him, “Cat, I need to do this.”

She wouldn’t budge. His watch beeped again, more insistently this time. Time really was starting to run out. He nudged her again, a little more forceful. Clementine meowed sharply, clearly intimidated.

“Will you *stop it!*” Tommy finally hissed, and Clementine recoiled, leaping off his lap, her fur standing on end. Instantly, regret coursed through him.

It wasn't her fault, not really. The mission had him on edge, but he shouldn't take it out on her. She was just a cat. How was she supposed to know he was having a bit of an emotional crisis? Prime, he was a horrible person. Snapping at some poor cat. As if he needed to add *yelling at innocent animals* to all the other shitty things on his ledger.

“Ughhh, I’m sorry Clem. It’s just...” he flopped back onto the pavement, tilting his head back against the brick wall. The lights of the buildings almost looked like stars dotting the roof of the cavern. “I need to do this, you know. I have to. Will, Techno, Phil...I need to show them I can handle it. They won’t...they’ll never respect me if I fail this. They’ll just keep seeing me as some stupid, weak kid. It won’t matter that I’ve never screwed up any other job, or that I’ve spent years trying to prove myself, if I mess this up now...”

They'd never forgive him. Knowing them they'd hunt him down and keep him locked in the base for the rest of his life. Or kill him. Or...something.

It unsettled him that he didn't really know anymore.

He thought he had for a while. He thought he knew them, before. They'd spent months in each other's presence, living within rooms of each other. He'd spent weeks reading in Techno's study. Days gardening with Phil. Hours training with Wilbur. For a while, he thought he had figured them out. Wilbur was petty but clever. Techno was solemn but steady. Philza was stern but kind. He thought they were *friends*, or at the very least acquaintances with some level of respect for each other.

But now it was like the slate was wiped clean. Like he didn't know anything anymore. All because of those six words.

You were Theseus. Now you're ours.

What was that even supposed to mean?

Why couldn't they just tell him things straight? Tommy, he--he wasn't used to this. He hadn't spent time with other people so closely for almost ten *years*. He couldn't help that he didn't understand it, the strange possessiveness, the way they were so freakishly *giving* and yet so closed off. It messed with him, enough that he couldn't quite even pinpoint exactly what he thought of them, whether they were friends or rivals or coworkers or something else. Everything they said, everything they *did* just made him more confused.

What did they *want* from him?

Everything was tangling up inside and choking his throat and confusing him more and the only thing that was clear was that for some reason they didn't trust him enough to let him do his *job*.

So he had to show them he could. He had to. Even if they never wanted to talk to him again afterward. He'd spent too long proving himself to stop now.

He couldn't screw this up. He just couldn't. Because if he did...

He didn't want to think about that. "But I won't, Clem. I can handle this. I can. I will. It'll be fine."

Clementine licked his face again, and then his cheeks, and then she settled for rubbing the top of her head up against him. It was comforting.

Tommy took a deep breath. "Thanks, Clem. You're right. I'm fine. I'll just march in there like I own the place. I got this."

The cat meowed. In agreement, Tommy liked to think.

"Okay. Okay. Thanks for the pep talk Clementine. I have to go now, really." Finally, Clementine graciously allowed herself to be moved off his lap. Tommy stood, brushing off his suit and turning toward the warehouse. Clementine followed.

Tommy shook his head. "No, no. Stay here. I'll come get you once I'm done, girl. I don't know whether those jerks have a rule against bringing pets into the house, but I can sure as hell try. Worst comes to worst I'll hide you in my room until after the fallout, okay?"

The cat stared at him.

"Stay." He pointed at her. One of her ears pulled back like she was appalled. "Clementine. Stay."

Grudgingly, Clementine sat. Clever blue eyes peered up at him. "Good girl. I'll be back. Wait for me, okay? I'll get you some real food when we get back to the base."

Without another word, Tommy disappeared into the night.

The guards were not nearly as easy to fool as Tommy had hoped. When he asked to be let in they just sort of glared down at him, hand resting on a holster at their side. "Appointment?"

Ugh. Tommy really didn't want to have to pull out his staff this early. Beating these guys down was an option, but certainly not a favorable one.

"Only people with appointments can get through." The guard huffed again, and an idea hit Tommy, "Do you have an appointment?"

Now, clearly Tommy didn't have an appointment. Obviously. He didn't even know who this Antfrost guy was, much less how to schedule a meeting with him. *He* didn't have a meeting.

But you know who did? Wilbur and Technoblade.

If what this guy was telling him was the truth, then they needed an appointment to get into the warehouse. So if Techno and Wilbur were planning to meet them at 2300, then maybe, just maybe...

Tommy pushed back his shoulders, giving his best *you're below me* pretentious glare at the guard. "Of course I have an appointment. I'm the representative from the Antarctic gang."

The guard paled considerably. Tommy bared his teeth. "Ah, so you recognize the name then. I expect there will be no more delays? I'm a busy man you know."

And somehow, somehow, that seemed to do the trick. The guard he had focused on nodded rapidly, looking at Tommy like he had just murdered a legion of soldiers in front of his eyes, like short, scrawny Tommy was forged of shadow and claw and blood. Like he was a monster. "Yes, of course, sir. So sorry for the delay. Uh, just..."

Tommy raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

The guard swallowed hard. "Nothing. Sir. Right this way."

Everything was red. *Very* red. Not that Tommy opposed or anything, red *was* his favorite color, but just...it was a lot. Red lights, red walls, red couches, red suits and dresses. It reminded him of his room back at the base, mostly because it was god-awful ugly. Like, he got that these were gang leaders and cult heads and all that, but couldn't they take an interior design lesson just *once*? The color scheme was horrid. Even his house at East Side looked better than this.

At least he'd gotten lucky with his outfit. The red suit had been a random pick from his closet, but it had clearly been the right one. He certainly fit in. There must have been hundreds of others in the warehouse in all, milling about, sipping out of wine glasses in the same sharp finery as him, clearly dressed for an event.

Tommy might have mistaken the entire thing for an ordinary party if not for all the guards milling about. And, you know, all the red.

Which, speaking of the guards: they might have been more of a problem than he thought.

See, his original plan was to dip once he got into the building: weasel his way out of the guard's grip, get lost in the crowd, and then search the building top to bottom for the floor plans. That plan was looking to be way more difficult than he'd thought. First, because the guard seemed dead set on escorting him to his meeting with head honcho Antfrost (in retrospect, Tommy might have done a little *too* good of a job convincing the guard he was important). Second, *because* he had a guard escorting him it felt like there were a million eyes on him, watching his every move. Drawing the very attention he had hoped to avoid.

So he couldn't just disappear. Too much attention was on him. He'd be apprehended in an instant.

Which, again, left him in a bit of a situation.

What was he supposed to do now? He couldn't run, but he sure as hell couldn't stay either, right? If he stayed the guard was *actually* going to take him to Antfrost, and then what? They'd be expecting someone from the Antarctic gang, not...*him*. Maybe...maybe he could cause a distraction somehow, maybe he could--

The guard nudged him. "Sir. We're here. His Highness will see you now."

Oh. Oh no. He'd gotten too caught up in thinking and now they were there, and if they were there that meant that Antfrost was waiting to see him and that meant he was going to come face to face with a cult leader who had amassed hundreds of followers and had probably killed hundreds more and if Tommy made a single wrong move then he would be added onto that list and--

Shit. Shitshitshitshit.

Okay, this was happening, *this was happening--*

The crowd parted for him, revealing a shining golden throne, a lush red cushion, and sitting there, perched atop it--

"*Clementine?!?*"

That, that was *his* cat, sitting there. Right? How many lookalike Siamese cats could there be? No, no this had to be some sort of sick joke or--there was a man there, standing there next to the throne, with ginger hair and green eyes and a pressed red suit, maybe he was the leader and he was just standing next to the throne with a cat--

"*What did you just call him?*" The man hissed, taking a single threatening step towards Tommy and the entire crowd around them tensed. Tommy wasn't backing down though. Not when this cult leader had taken *his* cat.

He matched the man's step towards him, baring his teeth. "*I said*, what the fuck are you doing with my cat?"

"*Your--?!?*" The man snarled, and in one smooth motion he grabbed a pistol from his waistline that Tommy hadn't realized was there and leveled it at his eyes, cocking the hammer, "What did you say, you disrespectful little brat?"

On second thought, maybe he could have the cat.

Tommy took a nervous step back until the man shook his head sharply, stopping him in his place. "Don't even think about it."

Distantly, there was an annoyed meow. One of the man's fingers hovered over the trigger, twitching--

"Velvet." A stiff, robotic voice interrupted and the man--Velvet?--froze, the gun wavering in his arm, "Let him be. He does not know better."

And Tommy, shocked and confused, looked at the source of the monotone voice, only to find himself looking at...a box? A small metal box, sitting next to the cat on the throne, buzzing with static.

The gun remained pointed at Tommy. Velvet glanced at the throne from the side of his eye with a frown. "Ant. He called you *Clementine*."

A few more short meows. The box hummed and more robotic words began to spill out from it. "No fault of the child. This may have been a slight error of my own."

Velvet glared toward the throne from the corner of his eye. "Antfrost. What did you do?"

The cat (*not Clementine?*) swished their tail irritably and meowed, and the voice box buzzed in response. "Do not fret. I took a walk."

And that's when everything started to click together. Velvet wasn't the one in charge, he couldn't be because he wasn't acting like he was in charge. No, he was deferring to the strange talking box. The box that was sitting on the throne, right next to...

No. No, that was insane. Impossible.

"Outside? Out in the streets?" Velvet snapped, and finally the gun was off of Tommy, tucked back into his belt as the man turned to the throne, "Who am I kidding, of course you did. I told you, you can't just walk around acting like you're a stray, Ant. I can't protect you out there."

The cat swished their tail, glancing around the room shiftily. There were eyes on them, Tommy knew, watching them from the crowd. He really had garnered too much attention walking in with the guards, not to mention speaking so bluntly with their cult's leader, so there were a lot of gazes on him and none particularly kind. The cat, at least, seemed to get that. They meowed sharply twice.

"Return to your business, subjects." The voice intoned immediately afterward and Tommy visibly saw the crowd shift away. There were still glances his way, still whispers in his direction, but it was less obvious now. The cat leveled a glare toward the man and hissed. "Perhaps I do not need your protecting."

"Don't be s--" Velvet started, and that's when the full impact of the situation hit.

Antfrost was Clementine. Clementine was Antfrost. Somehow the talking box was translating the cat's meows into human words.

Which meant this cat ruled half of the entire city.

Which meant Tommy had spilled his heart out to a cat that was actually able to speak that was actually a cult leader. What a fucking day.

He couldn't help it. He knew he was supposed to be respectful and all, but his mouth had a mind of his own.

"Wait. You--*you're* Antfrost??" He blurted, "But, you, you're a *cat*!"

Velvet's glare swiveled to him again.

"And?" he asked pointedly. Tommy shrunk back.

Antfrost meowed soothingly, lounging across his throne. The voice box hummed back to life. "There, there. He does not know of what he speaks, and I rather like this foolish child. He has given me many pets."

Foolish? Wait a second--

Velvet side-eyed Tommy. "I'm just saying, the mice are always hungry. He'd make a good meal."

He'd make a good *meal*?! For the *mice*? Maybe he was a little out of his league here. No insult to his ego was worth being fed alive to fucking mi--

"Dear, please stop frightening the business partners." The robotic voice hummed, and okay, had his cat just called this Velvet guy '*dear*'? Did he even *want* to unpack that? Antfrost turned to him lazily, meowing, and a few seconds later the translator box spoke. "Yes, my name is Antfrost. I am the Supreme Leader of the south side of Pogtopia. While I thank you for your offer to take me back to your base, boy, I find it rather unnecessary. I am where I belong here with my people."

Well. Okay then. Bold of the cat to assume Guess Clementine wasn't coming home to the base after all. "I--uh, you're welcome. Sir?"

The cat meowed. The voice box burst to life. "You may call me Antfrost. What is your name child?"

Child? Really? Antfrost was an actual, literal cat. How old could he even be, like eleven? And *he* was the child?

Whatever.

"Tommy." he responded.

"Tommy. You are here as a representative of the Antarctic gang. No?" Antfrost's head cocked, "How is it that I have not seen your face around?"

"Well." Time to improvise. "Usually they would send someone else. You know Wilbur?"

Antfrost's tail went stiff, his fur puffing up. He let out a long series of very expressive hisses and snarls.

The voice box hesitated. "Can not translate. Closest translation: I do not like this man."

Yeah, Tommy had gotten that.

"I feel you. Totally agree. Absolute bitch." He replied, nodding.

Velvet bristled. "Speak with some respect, kid."

Antfrost swished his tail at the man. "No, it is alright Velvet. His honesty is refreshing. Child, why have you been sent and not this Wilbur?"

Now this, this was easier. He didn't need to improvise for this question, because he could just tell the truth.

"Well, Cle--Antfrost, Wilbur seems to think that your gang is an obstacle. He'll be here later tonight in fact, to try and convince you to work together, but if anything goes wrong he's prepared to take this whole place down." Tommy told him, "I, on the other hand, think it would be much more beneficial if everyone stayed nice with each other. I'm sure you want things to stay calm too, for the protection of your people."

"Interesting." Antfrost replied, "And what do *you* want then?"

Alright, now things were happening. Antfrost was smart. Tommy's negotiation hadn't been a threat, but it sure as hell had been close, and Antfrost didn't seem like the kind of leader to put his subjects in such needless danger. By the looks of it he'd have those plans and be out the door in five minutes. He gave Antfrost his best charismatic grin. "All I want in return is some floor plans you guys got your hands on. The Antarctic gang needs them."

Antfrost went still. He shared a glance with Velvet. "Floor plans. *The* floor plans?"

“Uh...yes?” Tommy replied even though he was only like ninety percent positive they were talking about the same thing, “Yes. Yeah.”

“No. You can not have them.”

Wait, what? But...there was the threat of *war* on the line. Antfrost really wasn't willing to give them up?

“What? But--” Tommy began to protest.

The cat shook his head. “No. This is my final word. I appreciate your efforts to mend our relationships and I do hope we can deal with the north side of the city in the future, but the plans are not on the table to be given off.”

Tommy just stared at him. He didn't think the words had quite processed in his mind. “I--okay.”

There was a long, awkward silence.

“I wish you the best, young Tommy.” The voice buzzed.

Tommy blinked. “Thank you?”

“He's dismissing you.” Velvet snapped, “Leave.”

The man's hand settled back on the pistol at his side. Point taken. Time to go. “I, uh, okay. Thanks again.”

And that was that. In an instant, he had failed. Tommy stumbled back into the crowd.

On the bright side, he hadn't been fed to mice. On the downside, Tommy had sort of screwed up his mission.

Now that Antfrost and Velvet knew he was after the plans, stealing them would almost certainly ruin the relations between the Antarctic gang and the south side of the city. Which didn't mean he wasn't still going to steal them but...you know. It sort of sucked. Tommy, despite himself, liked Antfrost, and he didn't exactly want to see the Depths spiral into a civil war.

But whatever. No changing things now. He'd just have to go find the plans himself. Just as he began to push through the horde of people toward a side door someone tapped him on the shoulder and Tommy jumped, spinning to face it.

“Hey, kid.” Velvet whispered, shoving a piece of paper into his hands, “Ant wants me to give you this.”

Tommy glanced down at the tiny parchment in his hands and his eyes went wide. “This...these are instructions to get to a safe.”

“Yes.” Velvet huffed, pointedly refusing to meet his eyes, “It might not look like Ant gets a lot of pressure from his advisors, but...he does. If he gave you those floor plans outright the south side of the Depths would fall into chaos. Still...Ant, for some reason I can't *possibly* fathom, likes you. So here. Go take them. We'll just blame it on one of the rogue gangs.”

Tommy stared at the scrap of paper resting in his palm. “Uh. Thank you.”

“Don't disappoint him.” Velvet threatened him in a venomous whisper, “Or I'll make sure you regret it.”

And then Tommy was alone and holding the key to his entire mission.

He could have giggled. It had been...so easy. Practically served up to him on a silver platter.

From there it was simple. Without all the attention on him Tommy snuck away from the crowd with no issue, exiting out a back entrance way, climbing through the floors of the warehouse, avoiding guards, finding the safe and entering in the combo. Within minutes he had a collection of rolled up parchment tucked into his tool belt. Piece of cake. It was all basically routine at this point. The same as every other job he had ever done.

He re-entered the main compound of the warehouse with a grin. He was so close to getting away perfectly clean. Other than the whole Clementine situation the entire heist had been almost peaceful, honestly.

Man, was he good. He couldn't wait to see the look on Wilbur's face when he got back to the base and sh--

Tommy's watch began to beep.

No. No no no *no*, things had been going so well. How come this had to happen now? How could he have forgotten he was on a time limit?

Tommy's watch read 2300. This could not end well.

Right on cue, halfway across the warehouse Tommy saw a brown mop of hair bobbing slowly through the crowd, right next to a slightly shorter pink head of hair. And, right on cue, the crowd parted. Tommy and Wilbur locked eyes.

Wilbur's expression was priceless. He froze where he stood.

And Tommy...Tommy couldn't help himself.

He pulled the floor plans from his belt, and, just like he had done with Fundy months earlier, held them into the air. Into the light.

Wilbur's eyes caught on them. Tommy grinned.

Even from across the room Tommy could see the sparks flaring in Wilbur's eye, how his fists were clenched. His face was so red Tommy thought he might spontaneously combust.

It was too bad that foolish, reckless Tommy had no problem playing with fire.

He gave Wilbur a two fingered salute (this was becoming a bit of a pattern for him, huh?) and disappeared into the crowd.

Even after he got back to the base Tommy couldn't find it in himself to regret the decision.

Tommy typically prided himself on his wits, his ability to think on his feet and make smart decisions. This was anything but. Taunting Wilbur never was; his ego just overrode common sense this time. Gloating wasn't smart but it sure as hell was satisfying, and Tommy sort of felt like the man deserved it. He'd gotten the plans, after all. Wilbur, the entire gang, they'd all been wrong. Tommy felt like it was only fair he rub it in their face a little.

Hence why he was sitting in the kitchen, just waiting for them to return, his feet kicked up onto the table, his hands tucked behind his head. Lounging there like he owned the place. Again, not necessarily smart. Just vindicating.

He'd done it. He'd *won*.

So when, not half an hour after he got back, Tommy heard the distinct sound of the elevator beginning to rumble toward him, he couldn't help the smile that began to form on his face.

The rumble stopped. The elevator door slid open.

“Is that you guys?” Tommy called as he slowly cracked his eyes open, stretching like a cat after a long, satisfying nap, not quite able to keep the gloat out of his voice, “Welcome back! What took you so long?”

There was a pause, a moment of dark hesitation, and then the gang began to come out of the elevator.

Phil emerged first, ever the diplomat, his face etched with something like disappointment. As if Tommy cared. As far as he was concerned, Phil lost any right to be disappointed in him the moment he'd began laughing, the moment he'd cemented his betrayal.

Then came Technoblade, mouth twisted into a scowl, gaze harder than Tommy had ever seen it. Well, let him glare. He hoped this hurt.

And then--

“*You.*” The word was a hurricane, a tempest in a single syllable.

Wilbur. He stormed out of the elevator with barely stifled rage, all of it directed right at Tommy.

Despite it all--Wilbur's glare, Phil's frown, the sword hanging at Techno's side--despite the dangerous aura that was echoing throughout the room, Tommy couldn't help but gloat.

He pulled the floor plans from his belt, holding them up in the air like a trophy and grinning triumphantly.

“Bet you're all eating your words now, huh?” he taunted, “I got your stupid plans and I didn't even get chased for them. Completely clean getaway, I mended your business relationship with Antfrost, and--Hey!”

Techno plucked the rolled up papers from his hands, rifling through them, eyes scanning the parchment.

“They're legit.” He confirmed. His gaze flickered from the plans to Wilbur back to the plans, but never to Tommy. Like he wasn't even there. “He got the plans.”

“Let me see those.” Wilbur snapped, snatching them from Techno, unrolling them in his hands. He stared at them for a second, then two, and then a myriad of emotions flashed across his face--shock first, then confusion, then displeasure. When his expression finally settled, it was on pure, unfettered rage.

Wilbur's head jerked back up towards Tommy. “So, what, you went behind our backs, ignored our direct orders to go get the plans and upstage us? What, to make a point? For *fun*?”

They were taking this much more seriously than he had thought. Sure he'd *technically* stepped out of line, but still, he'd gotten the plans right? He'd proven himself. Whatever happened to no harm, no foul? He honestly expected them to yell at him once and then shake it off. Congratulate him, even. He'd basically done their job for them. Made their lives a hell of a lot easier. Wasn't that something to be proud of?

But maybe it just hadn't sunk in yet. Another moment or two and it would hit, and then the frowns painting their faces would fade and they'd pat him on the back for a job well done.

So he grinned. “Obviously. And I looked good doing it too.”

It was clearly not the right thing to say. The storm clouds in Wilbur's eyes got thicker, more violent. He took a single, menacing step toward Tommy. “Do you even know what you could have compromised? Do you have any idea how many years of work you could have sent down the drain? Huh?”

The grin flipped.

Fine. Whatever. He'd spent the entire night working his ass off to get the plans, but no, it was more important to yell at him. For something he couldn't even control. *Did he know what he could have compromised*, of course not! How the hell would he?

"No!" He snarled, glaring right back, "Because *you* won't tell me!"

Wilbur took another step towards him and then another until he was leaning over Tommy, his face contorted into something thunderous. "Fine. You wanna know? You wanna know what you could have ruined?"

He spun on one heel and slammed the plans down on the table, unrolling them onto the wood.

And, for the first time, Tommy realized just exactly what the Antarctic gang had planned.

"Schlatt." He whispered, "You're taking down Schlatt."

Because that was Schlatt's mansion in the floor plans. That was Schlatt's Square there, outlined in pen.

Wilbur glowered. "And you could've ruined everything."

Schlatt. The man he hated so desperately. The man who had been responsible for every, and Tommy meant *every*, problem in his life.

They were going to bring him down.

They could do it, he didn't doubt that. He'd seen what they could do. They'd burn the Lights to the ground if that's what it took. Tommy'd be happy to see them go--hell, he'd light the first match if they so asked.

"Wait, wait, but I didn't! I got your plans." He gasped, his mind racing, an idea taking form, "I--I can help!"

With his thieving skills and gadgets and contacts, he could be a part of this too, he could help them...

Means and motive, he had both. He...they could...

"No." Wilbur hissed.

Tommy's eyes shone, his mouth moving faster than his ears could process the words. "I've already *been* helping, I--holy shit, I can partner up with you!"

They were already together, already acquainted so well, all of them driven by a singular purpose. They...they could be a real *team* this time, a *fa--*

"No."

But Tommy was already latched onto it, the possibility of it. "We can take him down together, I've already done all those jobs for you!"

And he had hadn't he? It wasn't just that he *could* help, it was that he already had. All those jobs for them, the whole reason they had hired him in the first place--it had to be for Schlatt. Prime, everything was finally starting to make sense, the ring, the microchip, the camera, it was all part of a bigger plan all along. He just hadn't been able to see it--

"No!"

For just a second, Tommy grinned up at Wilbur with stars in his eyes. It was brilliant. The whole thing, hiring him to stop Schlatt, absolutely brilliant, and for just one miniscule moment Wilbur couldn't ever have done or said anything wrong. Tommy looked up at him like Wilbur had hung the moon in the sky, like he had ignited the stars themselves.

He couldn't contain the excitement. "Fundy, and the microchip and getting up the Walls, all this time, holy shit I've been helping you take down Schlatt, I've been working to take down--"

"No you haven't! You haven't!" Wilbur finally screeched, and at his expression Tommy's smile froze, "You haven't done anything! All those jobs--"

"Will--" Techno, who had kept unsurprisingly silent during the entire exchange, took a warning step towards Wilbur. Behind him Philza's face twisted into something resembling fear. The look of the man who had just fallen off the edge of a cliff, and knew the ground was fast approaching, and couldn't do anything to stop it.

But Wilbur didn't listen. "All those jobs, you weren't helping to take down Schlatt. You weren't doing anything."

The room went silent, and Tommy...

Tommy was confused.

He laughed uneasily. His voice shook. "Wilbur? Of course I was, you're trying to take down Schlatt and I did all those jobs to help. I got everything you asked for, I did all my work, I--"

Wilbur exploded.

"Those jobs were *tests*, Tommy! They weren't real! What, did it never cross your little mind that it was weird we were sending you all across the city for random items? A ring, a microchip, a random *camera*? You really think *we* need *those*? You really think that could help us? We're the Antarctic gang! We don't need--we don't need some pathetic street kid. Every job we sent you on, *everything* you did--it was all a test! Those items--they were useless. Completely worthless. You haven't helped us with Schlatt. You haven't done anything at all!"

The air left his chest. Time stood still.

Tommy's eyes flickered to Techno, then Phil. Searching, *pleading*, for one of them to step in. To deny it.

Neither spoke. Both just--looked at him. There was something almost pitying in their eyes.

Wilbur was telling the truth.

"They--they were all--" Tommy repeated helplessly, stumbling back a few steps like he'd just been shot through the chest, "Everything was--you--"

Another tense silence. Tommy felt as if he was standing on the edge of a precipice, teetering, desperately trying to keep grounded as everything he'd ever thought about the gang trembled and collapsed around him.

Lies. Was all he could manage to think. *Liars*.

Tommy breathed out and then he fell.

And then he was running and Phil spun towards him and Techno was reaching out and Tommy dodged and ducked past their hands and then he was in the elevator, collapsing against the wall, trying desperately to catch his breath, his eyes burning a thousand times worse than before.

The last thing he saw as the elevator creaked shut was Wilbur's eyes, cold and impassive. Phil was moving towards him, Techno practically lunging for the door, but Wilbur was just standing there. Glowering. Unapologetic.

The door slid shut.

Chapter End Notes

GUYS I SWEAR WILBUR ISNT THE VILLAIN I PROMISE OKAY IM SORRYYYYY

yes I made the big bad of the south side a talking cat. deal with it.

see you guys soon :)) thanks for all the wonderful kudos and art and comments they're always so fun to read <33

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Tommy runs.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy blinked and he was in front of Purpled's shop.

He wasn't sure how he'd gotten there, wasn't even sure how long it had been since Wilbur's eyes had burned into his skin as the elevator slid shut. All he knew was that now he was there, standing in front of the neon purple door and shaking violently.

Slowly, numbly, a single hand lifted towards the wood and knocked. Once. Twice.

And then it was back at his side and he was stiff as a board again, staring blankly at the door.

Something rummaged from inside the shop. Tommy heard a thud, footsteps, the faint sound of muffled words drawing near. "...too late for this...always with the 0500 calls with these people...never get a single second of rest...fucking entrepreneurship, should have just stayed with pu--" and then, right on the other side of the door, impossibly close: "This better be *really* good or somebody is about to get an iron sword sent into their *fucking* skull, it's the middle of the fucki--"

The door swung open. A long pause. "Tommy?"

Tommy blinked.

Purpled's face went from shock and irritation to something that Tommy might have actually mistaken for concern if he didn't know Purpled and hadn't already realized the kid didn't care about anyone but himself. He gave Tommy a once over, surely noticing the now-wrinkled red suit, just how pale his face had gotten, the way his eyes were a little too dull.

"Tommy?" He repeated, softer this time.

Tommy blinked again.

"Purpled?" He whispered, voice just a little too faint, "Hi."

An expression that was almost frightened flashed in Purpled's eyes. He opened the door wider. "Tommy. Theseus. Come on, dude, let's get you inside."

Gentler than Tommy would have thought he was capable, he took Tommy's arm and led him into the shop, past all his traps and gadgets, behind a deep purple curtain, into a back room that looked like a lounge, then a kitchen, then to a wooden table with a single chair. Purpled nudged him and Tommy collapsed into it, staring vacantly around the room. Distantly, he knew he needed to be planning. His subconscious had led him all the way to Purpled's for a reason after all. He needed his help. He should be talking to him, asking for his help, plotting his escape.

But his mind was just. Blank.

Because if he started thinking about how he could leave then it was inevitable that he would end up thinking about the chain of events leading up to him running off and then he would end up thinking about one conversation in particular.

And he couldn't. He just couldn't.

"Tommy." Purpled poked his arm, "*Tommy*."

Yes. Purpled. Right. He was here too.

Tommy forced a weak grin. "Oh. Sorry. Yeah?"

Purpled's jaw dropped. His hand, which had been resting on Tommy's shoulder, recoiled like it had been burned.

He stared at Tommy like he had gone mad. "What--what is *wrong* with you?"

Tommy looked at him in confusion.

Purpled's lips pressed into a thin line and he spun on one heel back towards his kitchen. "That's it, I'm calling Philza."

And that was what finally snapped him out of it. Hearing that name.

Philza. Phil. And Techno and Wilbur. Purpled was going to--

Oh fuck.

"No!" Tommy shrieked, and he jerked toward Purpled, nearly falling out of the chair. "No, you can't, don't, Purpled, I can't go back there."

Purpled crossed his arms over his chest.

"Tommy, they're my employers. They pay me. I get you guys always have your little spats, but I'm sure once you sit down and talk it through you idiots will all hug it out or whatever." Tommy's expression fell and Purpled sighed. "You look like *shit*, Tommy. I can't just leave you like this. I'm calling them."

No. No no no, he couldn't. He--he shouldn't have come here, he should have known that Purpled's loyalties only lied where there were Primes, that he would turn him over to the gang.

He couldn't do this.

But Purpled was already leaving, already heading to the phone, and so proud, unbreakable Tommy resorted to something he never thought he would: begging. "Purpled, *please*, I can leave, I can do whatever you want. Just don't call them."

Purpled hesitated. Something in Tommy's voice had gotten through to him.

"Tommy..." he said quietly, "What did they do?"

Tommy swallowed hard. Stared at his hands. "They were all tests. All of my work with them...just tests."

"Fundy?" Purpled asked. Tommy didn't trust his voice to do anything but nod. "Well, I mean, it's scummy but not exactly unusual. Most gangs give their new recruits a test job before they--"

"Not just one."

Purpled's eyes went wide. "Oh."

"They--they had me climb the Walls, Purpled." Tommy whispered, fidgeting with his hands, avoiding his gaze. "And I fell. I almost--I was going to *die*."

And Purpled...Purpled's gaze went hard. Harder than Tommy had ever seen it. "*Oh*."

"I don't think they even meant to tell me. I think Wilbur was just mad enough that he let it slip." Tommy whispered, "I could have died. For nothing."

And that was the problem wasn't it.

It wasn't just that the items were useless. That, he could get over. He knew what he had signed up for when he became Theseus--dumb assignments and seemingly pointless thefts were just part of the job when you were working with a clientele like his. He was in it for the Primes and the name recognition, and nothing else much mattered.

With the gang...it was different. They had recruited him specifically, had gone out of their way to find him, had basically sworn him to secrecy, and then had plotted careful, intricate schemes for each of his jobs. They sent him out on their heists and Tommy had thought--he had *known*--that finally he was a part of something important. Finally he was doing *something*. Because this was the Antarctic gang, and they had recruited *him*, so of course their jobs would have some hidden deeper purpose, an impact.

Tommy had put *weeks* of blood and sweat and admittedly a few tears into planning for them. Because he needed to impress them. Because he thought this was the job where he would finally become more than a nobody on the streets. He'd prove his parents wrong, prove Dream wrong, and he'd finally become a Theseus worthy of legends.

So to be told so plainly, so outright, that the jobs were all for nothing wasn't just painful--it was crushing.

He--he had almost *died* for those jobs to impress them. And they were all tests? All that work, all that *pain*, pointless? And for what? Because they didn't think him capable?

How much more did he need to do to prove himself?

He'd had a perfect record, *a perfect record*, when they had hired him and it still hadn't been enough. And then even after that, even when he had aced all of their dumb, stupid tests, they still hadn't trusted him.

When would it be enough? When would he be worthy of his name? Was it too much to ask for someone, *anyone*, to acknowledge what was basically his life's work, to respect him? He...he just wanted someone to be proud of him, damn it. Just once.

And another layer of betrayal--even after all that time, even after living together for weeks, they still hadn't told him. It all made sense now--Wilbur's hesitance to be near him, the vague-ass statements about how guilty he felt without any real explanation--they had to have known how horrible it had been to do that to him and still, *still*, they had hidden it from him. He might never have even known if not for Wilbur's fit of rage and his loose lips.

It was hard to wrap his mind around the fact that they didn't even have the decency to do that--to just tell him that one, all-important truth.

Because they didn't trust him. Because they didn't think he was good enough. To them, they were the Antarctic gang and he was just Tommy, and Tommy was nothing.

That was what Wilbur had really meant, wasn't it? At its core, at the heart of his words, he had really just confirmed it: Tommy couldn't help them because Tommy was useless. Worthless. Even after he tried so incredibly hard to prove himself, they still didn't think he was good enough.

But that was fine. Totally fine. He didn't need them. There were other ways he could fall into his role as Theseus.

One thing was for certain--he couldn't stay there. There was nothing left for him there anymore.

With the realization came clarity.

Finally, finally, Tommy's mind clicked back into place, the world shifted into focus, he was *centered* again.

With it came a decision. A plan.

He shoved Wilbur out of his mind, ignored the daggers of pain stabbing at his heart, the sting of betrayal against his skin, and he was ready.

"Purpled." When Tommy met Purpled's gaze there was no more fog. Just an iron will and a broken dream. Resolution. "I need you to show me the way out of the city. I need to get out of the Depths."

Purpled was already grabbing things off of shelves, stuffing on a pair of boots, slinging a sword across his waist.

"Welcome back, Theseus." He grinned over his shoulder, nodding once, "Let's go."

Tommy stood.

Maybe one day, when he finally proved his worth, he would come back for them, draped in a cape of his own, and Wilbur would acknowledge him and smile and tell him he'd done well.

But, until then, Theseus had work to do.

Tommy wouldn't have asked Purpled to lead him out of the city if he knew he was going to be such a dick about it.

"Can you *please* stop sprinting?" he yelled through a gasp for air, "Purpled!"

Purpled, who was running two lengths ahead of him, didn't even bother slowing down, the jerk.

"For the supposed Prince of Thieves you're very slow." He called back over his shoulder and Tommy gritted his teeth.

Maybe it would have been better to stay with fucking Wilbur if it meant not dealing with this asshole. Tommy was exhausted. It had been a long 24 hours and he hadn't had a wink of sleep through any of it, and once the world had refocused it felt like his body had been sucked of energy and all he wanted to do was sleep.

He couldn't understand why they couldn't just *walk* to the route to the surface. It's not like they were in some sort of rush. It wasn't going anywhere.

Honestly, he sort of thought Purpled was running ahead just to be a jerk.

"Seriously. I'm going to have a stroke." He told Purpled, "Can we actually slow down?"

"No."

Tommy bit his lip hard enough to draw blood. "Why the fuck not? What's the rush, dickhead? Huh?"

"Tommy, I don't understand how you don't get this. We need to *move*." Purpled finally, *finally* stopped, abruptly enough that Tommy nearly ran into him, pointing sharply at the Community House looming in the

distance. "There's only one way out of the city, and the Antarctic gang knows it. Once they realize you're trying to leave they'll know exactly where to strike. They'll trap us here if we don't hurry and then it's only a matter of time."

Tommy rolled his eyes. "They're not going to come after me or anything, Purpled. I don't think they ever even wanted me there to begin with, they're not going to try to catch me now."

Purpled stared at him incredulously. Tommy crossed his arms.

"You are *such* an idiot." Purpled snapped, "How are you not dead yet? How? You're literally the luckiest dumbass I have ever met."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Tommy hissed, "What, you think I'm wrong? Purpled, they flat out said they didn't need me. Why else would they hunt me down?"

"*Dear fucking Prime why am I the one always stuck with the idiots?*" Purpled mumbled under his breath, running a hand through his hair before he turned back to glare at Tommy. "Tommy, have you ever considered that they might just *like* you? That maybe when they showed up to find a bloody, broken kid in the middle of the slums and carried him home and nursed him back to health they might get a little bit attached?"

"No." Tommy replied instantly. "Nope. Not possible."

"Okay fine, then let's put it like this: they're possessive little bitches and the odds are about a thousand to one that they come to find you. Or, *maybe*, they don't want someone who's seen their faces and knows their names just wandering around the surface world, like a walking, talking, security breach waiting to happen." Purpled snapped, "Is that better? You see my point? Do they really seem like the people to let things go?"

And...and that was actually a fair point. If Tommy and Wilbur were similar in one way only it was that they were stubborn, and Philza and Technoblade weren't too far off either. Not to mention, Techno had already made clear once before that they couldn't have him leaving with his insider knowledge...

Oh shit. They were going to come after him, weren't they?

Purpled saw the change in his face, saw as the realization echoed through his mind, and nodded grimly.

"Exactly. Which is why we need to move." He turned back toward the Community House, going back into a steady jog and this time Tommy followed without complaint. "You probably bought about two hour's worth of a head start before they realized you weren't coming back, and hopefully it was another hour or two before they were able to start moving toward the Community House. With luck we should be able to squeeze in before they shut all the routes down, because if not we're absolutely screwed."

"Can't we just go somewhere else in the city? Hunker down for a while?" Tommy asked, though he had a sinking suspicion he already knew the answer.

Purpled leveled him a look. "Tommy. The Antarctic gang is everywhere. *Everywhere*. There's nowhere in this city that they can't reach."

His lips tightened, his face resolute. "Once they close off those routes we'll be like fish in a barrel. Trapped."

Tommy picked up his speed.

The Community House, despite its stern exterior, was actually rather nice on the inside, all shining marble and high ceilings and potted green plants. Purpled didn't bother to look at any of it though, before he

marched right up to the front desk, where a girl with brown hair and a pink hoodie was typing on a computer.

"Astelic, you have a route up for me? It's urgent." Purpled asked, leaning up against the counter.

The girl shrugged. She didn't even bother looking up from her computer. "Sorry chief, we just got word that we're supposed to shut the place down. Last ride headed out about five minutes ago."

Tommy physically felt the hope drain from him.

"Fuck." Purpled grunted, and then, a second later, "Astelic, how about I cash in one of those favors?"

Now *that* caught her attention. She eyed Tommy, raising a skeptical eyebrow. "A favor? For this?"

For a moment Purpled hesitated, like even he was considering whether it was worth it, and Tommy's confidence in him faltered. Finally, after a pause that was just a little too long, he nodded.

"Yeah." he sighed, "I know. I'm questioning my sanity too. Just...can you do it?"

The girl's eyes lit up and she typed furiously on her computer for a minute before she looked back up at them with a satisfied smile.

"Well, it seems there was a logistics error in some of our data and one last ride might head out after all." She whispered conspiratorially, "It really would be a shame if anyone found out about the shuttle leaving from platform seven in five minutes. Just a shame."

"Knew I could count on you Astelic. Consider us even." Purpled told her.

Astelic gave him a feral grin. "Pleasure doing business with you."

And then they were off again, Purpled dragging him down a hall and then another and another before they turned into a small, white room. Along the far side, through a gap in the wall, was a small, metal, person-sized capsule.

Tommy couldn't help but think it looked similar to a metal casket. He also couldn't help but think that literal *coffin* was what he needed to get into to get to the surface.

He eyed it uneasily. Prime, he was going to hate this. Just him and his claustrophobia, trapped in that tiny little container for who knew how long...On second thought, maybe staying with the gang wouldn't be so awful after all. He could just stay in the Depths forever. And, you know, never go in one of those things ever.

"Don't even think about it." Purpled hissed from behind him, "I used a favor on you. Get in the damn shuttle Theseus."

Shit. No getting out of this then. Tommy stepped into the capsule.

Purpled pulled a leather strap over his chest and ankles, which, unsurprisingly, did not reassure Tommy at all. "Okay, this will drop you off right on the edge of the mid district. It should open up to an alleyway or something. *Make sure you're not seen.* Got it? From there it's up to you. I assume you have some sort of plan for where you'll go after this?"

Uh.

No, actually. Tommy hadn't really gotten that far. He was mostly just preoccupied with getting *away*. He hadn't really thought about after that.

Purpled would never let him live this down.

"Of course." Tommy lied, crossing his arms over his chest, and the kid raised an eyebrow.

Purpled shrugged. "Whatever dude. Not my problem."

"Then why are you helping me?" Tommy couldn't help but snap back.

Purpled's hands froze where they were tightening the strap on Tommy's chest. He sighed. "They shouldn't have done that to you, and they shouldn't have hidden it, and I won't be a part of handing you back over to them just to watch them lock you in that base again. You're not built for that, and I don't know how they can't see it. Maybe this will teach them."

The admission was...shocking, to say the least. Tommy hadn't really thought Purpled would give a shit, honestly.

He recovered an instant later, covering up the shock with a taunting smile. "If I didn't know better, I would almost say it sounds like you *care*, Purp."

Purpled recoiled like even the thought of it repulsed him, scowling. "Don't get all sappy idiot, okay? It's still mostly because you bring in a lot of revenue. I'm sick of losing it because they won't let you out on jobs."

He ran a hand through his hair. "So stay sharp, okay? You'll be back on the surface now. No more living it easy. So, like, *survive*. You still have your instincts, *use them*. I don't want to lose my best customer."

Purpled reached out to close the door of the shuttle, and Tommy knew it might be too much to ask but he couldn't help but blurt out the question on the tip of his tongue. "Purpled...if they come and find you and ask you to hunt me down..."

Purpled froze. Looked away. His face was set into a firm line. "Trust me, I plan on staying far away from this whole mess until it blows over. I can't tell you I'll say no if they ask for me, but I can say that they won't find you because of my help. Maybe I'll make a few mistakes, follow up on some false leads, yeah?"

It wasn't quite a yes, but it was something. Purpled was on his side. "Thanks, man."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Can't believe I'll be tarnishing my flawless record for your sake." The kid glanced back up at Tommy. "You stay alive, okay Tommy?"

He stuck his hand out. It was an awkward motion, like he wasn't used to it and not fully comfortable with it even then, but Tommy took it anyway.

"You too, Purpled." he replied, and he meant it.

He pulled back from the handshake and the door slammed closed, and suddenly Tommy remembered why he was so hesitant to go into the shuttle because his chest was getting all tight and the darkness was closing in on him and--oh shit.

A motor rumbled somewhere underneath him. Metal clicked, gears shifted.

No. No no, he changed his mind, he couldn't do this actually. Tommy banged on the door. "Purpled! Wait!"

"Don't die!" Purpled's voice called faintly from somewhere outside the metal box. Tommy began to hyperventilate. "Have fun! Try not to throw up when it lets you out!"

The shuttle shot off into the ground.

Safe to say, the ride to the surface was literal hell.

When Tommy finally stumbled off the shuttle and out into the alleyway his throat was hoarse and his mind just as foggy as it had been when he had first shown up at Purpled's shop, and maybe that was why he blinked and realized that he had somehow spaced out and his feet had carried him all the way to familiar territory of their own accord.

East Side. And there, just across the street, Bad and Skeppy's bakery.

The fog cleared.

The first thing that hit him was the air. He hadn't realized how stale it had been in the Depths all those miles underground, how dry and lifeless it had tasted in his mouth. Being back on the surface, the dawn on his skin and the fresh air in his lungs...it felt like a new beginning.

And then Tommy realized he should probably stop standing in the middle of the street just *breathing* and get a move on.

Tommy hadn't meant to go to East Side, had meant to avoid it completely in fact, but now...now he had something of a plan. He was already there, wasn't he? And after leaving the Depths so quickly, he desperately needed supplies. Supplies that could very well still be up in his room.

It was worth a shot, wasn't it?

He was climbing up onto the roof before he could second guess himself. In and out. He'd just grab whatever he could find and go. Skeppy and Bad wouldn't even have to know he was there.

His room was startlingly clean. The little pile of blankets he slept in was actually folded into something resembling a bed, his desk was wiped of his usual grime. He could see all his old stuff arranged neatly on his shelves. There was still a rust-colored stain on the floor where Tommy had almost bled out, but it was fainter than he expected, like someone had scrubbed at it again and again and just hadn't quite been able to get the copper out.

Other than that, though...it was spotless.

Tommy hated it.

It looked like a tomb. Far too tidy. It had never been this clean in all the time he'd lived there. It was unnatural.

But Tommy had more pressing matters to attend to than pondering the way his room was so strangely, carefully orderly, and so he began to search.

He found the chocolate bar he'd saved for so long on one of his shelves. Stashed in a pocket he'd sliced into the underside of his desk were all of his Prime cards, loaded with what had to be at least a few thousand Primes (and hallelujah to that, he missed having money of his own). A set of clothes, a switchblade, his old screwdriver from a drawer, and all of his flash drives with the records of his thefts and his personal info and logs of the messages on his Theseus account from a secret hole he had carved out inside the walls of the room.

His old Lmanburg flag, strangely enough, was the only thing he couldn't seem to find at all, but perhaps Bad or Skeppy or whoever had cleaned up his room had just moved it. Or burned it, more likely. Those flags were extremely illegal. He wouldn't blame them.

He found his laptop in one of the drawers in his desk. It was dead after months of sitting abandoned of course, but still. If he could find a way to charge it up he'd practically have his complete Theseus set up all over again. He'd be back up and ready for business.

Tommy had only just begun to think that maybe his whole expedition into East Side would actually go off without a hitch when he heard footsteps from outside the door.

From somewhere behind him, Tommy heard the distinct sound of a gun cocking.

On raw instinct and a dose of stupidity, Tommy spun and dropped to the ground. Something whizzed past his head, a bang echoed through the room, and Tommy's gaze shot to the intruder. His eyes met brown ones and--

The gun clattered to the floor.

Skeppy's voice was little more than a whisper.

"Tommy?"

Skeppy. The same Skeppy who had vowed to turn him into the guards at the first hint of Tommy causing trouble and now Tommy was in front of him, stealing all of his old stuff, standing in what remained of a pool of his own blood.

This was not good.

Skeppy had a *gun*. Also not good.

Tommy needed to do some bargaining, and he needed to do it fast.

"Skeppy!" Tommy shouted, "Fancy seeing you here, mate. Wonderful day out, isn't it? Look, I, uh, I must have taken a wrong turn or something, I'll just be going now, you won't have to worry about seeing me here again dude, so we can just leave the gun on the ground there, yeah? No need to get hasty, I'm--"

Skeppy's arm shot out. Tommy flinched back instinctively, but the man was just using it to balance himself against the doorway, like he thought he might pass out or something. Now that Tommy thought about it, he did look a little pale. And he was still staring at Tommy like he had seen a ghost.

"Tommy?" Skeppy whispered again, "Is this real?"

Tommy wasn't quite sure how to respond to that.

"You..." Skeppy repeated, voice broken, "We thought you were *dead*. We just...we woke up one night and there were thuds and voices and...by the time we got up there you were gone and all that was left was a pool of blood. *So much blood*. We went to see Sam and he said he hadn't seen you in *weeks*. And we just assumed....we thought...."

He swallowed hard. "It hasn't been the same since you were gone, you know, and the whole while we just knew it was our fault and--but that doesn't matter, you're fine. You're fine?"

Tommy was not. He wasn't fine at all. He was more broken than ever.

But Skeppy was clearly already upset about him disappearing. What was he supposed to say? *Yeah, Skeppy, I was kidnapped by this super powerful gang that I sort of worked for for months, and then we became friends and then they showed me a big underground city under this one, and then they wouldn't let me out of their base so I went to negotiate with a cat for the plans to Schlatt's mansion? Oh yeah, and did I mention I'm a world class thief?*

Yeah. No way.

So he lied. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine, I just...I...I found a job. It, uh...I was safe there. Paid well too."

Skeppy sighed, and it was like months of stress had just been lifted off his shoulders. He was clearly relieved, and he peered up at Tommy with a faint smile. "Good. That's really good. But...why are you back here then?"

"We...we had a bit of a falling out." Tommy told him, fully aware that it wasn't really an answer, "I just came to get all my old stuff, and then I'll head out though. There's no need to worry, I'm not planning on staying. I won't endanger you or Bad."

"No, no, absolutely no, Tommy. There's no way you're leaving again." Skeppy replied, shaking his head, and Tommy's response caught in his throat. "I was wrong. You're a good kid, Tommy, no matter what sort of business you get into. We can handle it, we can handle you. Stay."

"I--" For just a moment, Tommy considered it. He considered staying.

They wanted him. That was what Skeppy was telling him. They wanted him there.

Tommy wanted to stay.

And then reality came crashing back and Tommy remembered that it was an impossibility. "No. I can't."

"What do you mean, of course you can." Skeppy told him, stepping closer, "We didn't do well taking you in before, I know that, but this time it will be better. We never should've--"

"No! Skeppy, you don't get it, it's still dangerous--" Tommy tried to protest.

Skeppy frowned. "*I don't care.*"

"Do you want to die?! Do you want Bad to?" Tommy yelled, and Skeppy froze. "That's what I thought. I'm being hunted, Skeppy. There's three of them, the same three that took me in the first place, and I don't know what they'll do to get me back, and I'll be damned if I put you and Bad in harm's way because of it. I'm leaving."

Skeppy's lips parted, clearly about to protest. His hand reached out towards Tommy, and Tommy knew that if he let himself be pulled in...he would stay. The offer was tempting, so tempting, to go back to the way it was before. It would be...safe. Familiar. And for a while maybe he would be happy.

But then, inevitably, the gang would show up, and not only would he be in trouble but so would Bad and Skeppy. Because...Tommy really didn't know what they would do if Bad and Skeppy tried to stop them from taking him again. And Tommy didn't want to find out. He wasn't willing to put them in that sort of danger for his own sake.

So he pulled away.

"No. Look, from here on out, I am dead to you, okay? Just some street kid that you didn't even know existed in a storage room you never used, okay? *I was not here.* Don't even tell Bad I was here. Because if they come, and you give away that you know anything, *anything*, they'll kill you." Tommy ordered, already slinging his bag of belongings over his shoulder, tying up the laces on his boots. "You get that? I'm going to run, and hopefully they'll track me instead of my trail here, but if you see anyone suspicious don't fucking give it away. You don't know me, you haven't seen me in months, I was never here. Get it? Tommy is dead."

This time, Skeppy doesn't try to stop him as he goes.

He needed to leave East Side, that much was clear.

It would be far too simple for the gang to find him there if they really did venture topside to come after him, and he cared far too much about Bad and Skeppy to lead the gang straight to them. Knowing Wilbur, he would be leading the charge and he would be *pissed*, and when Wilbur was angry...

He wasn't quite sure what they would do. He wasn't quite sure what they were capable of anymore. Prime knew they didn't have a problem putting *his* life on the line--what would they do to two random bakers they thought were standing in their way? No, the East Side was not an option. He had gotten what he needed and now it was time to get the hell out.

But...there was one last place in East Side he needed to go to. His last piece of business and then he'd be gone forever.

Sam.

He just--he had to see the man before he left. Tommy had basically grown up there, in that shop. He couldn't leave without one last look. Maybe, just maybe...Sam would have missed him too. Tommy couldn't help but hope.

So there he was standing in front of the man's door, trying to work up the courage to knock. If Bad and Skeppy seemed to worry, surely Sam, his Sam, would be happy to see him. Right?

Probably. Maybe.

Tommy still hadn't forgotten how Sam had slammed the door in his face. That was the last time they had seen each other, months ago.

Finally, after half an eternity, Tommy raised a hand to knock.

Before he could reach it, the door creaked open on its own. Beyond it, Sam's shop was draped in darkness.

Something uneasy began to churn in Tommy's gut.

"Hello?" he called into the shadows, "Sam?"

Only silence echoed back.

Maybe...maybe Sam wasn't in?

It was a weak explanation and he knew it. Sam was basically a recluse--he didn't 'go out', he didn't even venture into the sunlight unless he absolutely had to for a supply run. He didn't just leave. Especially not with his door unlocked and open, his prized inventions completely unprotected against prying eyes and fingers.

He loved his creations like his own children. He wouldn't just leave them defenseless.

Something about the whole situation made his skin crawl. Something about it was wrong.

So it was with his heart in his throat and his hand on his staff that he inched closer and nudged open the door. It gave a long, high creak as it did, slowly opening to reveal the depths of Sam's shop--

Tommy recoiled.

Sam's shop was in ruins.

Debris was scattered across the floor, the shelves picked clean of all of his beautiful, ingenious inventions, his thick, sturdy workbench, the one he had always done his sketches at, was in jagged pieces. Tommy

couldn't help but stumble inside. Searching for something, anything. He swiped a finger over one of the few remaining work tables and it came away thick with dust.

And then it finally sunk in.

No one had been there in a very, very long time.

Sam was gone.

Chapter End Notes

GUYS A LOT OF YOU WERE HATING ON SBI IN THE COMMENTS LAST TIME I PROMISE
THEYLL BE REDEEMED DONT LOSE FAITH

Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Tommy's escaped the gang. But what now?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy Innett was undeniably one of the most powerful people in the city of Manburg.

He might not have been the richest, or the strongest, or the most charismatic person, but he had worked for all of them, and there was a power to that even Tommy didn't know. He had connections in every part of the city, footholds in some of the most influential gangs in the Underground, and favors from some of the most resourceful businessmen in the new (post-apocalyptic) world.

Unfortunately, Tommy Innett was also extremely broke. It didn't take very long for him to realize he needed a job. The Prime cards he had stashed would only last him so long, after all, and now that he was both homeless and possessionless he needed a way to put food on the table. And, you know, somewhere to live.

Ordinarily, this wouldn't be a dilemma. He was *Theseus*. Regardless of how long he'd been away from his work, people would be tripping over themselves to employ him. He could have a job in minutes. Seconds, if he actually tried.

No, the *issue* was keeping the news of his return on the down low, at least for a while.

In all likelihood, he was being hunted. Purpled, as much as Tommy hated to admit it, had a point. The gang had been clear about him leaving--it wasn't going to happen. They weren't going to *let* it happen. He was too much of a liability, a treasure trove of classified information. He knew their names, their faces, their identities. The Antarctic gang didn't like risks. They didn't like to lose. Knowing them, knowing Wilbur...they'd be looking for him.

If he wanted to stay out of their clutches he needed to lay low. He couldn't publicly advertise his services like he usually would, not unless he wanted to broadcast his location across the entire Underground. Normally he'd just go through the Theseus account on his laptop and see if any of his previous clientele had a need for his special skill set, but with his computer dead that wasn't an option. Going to Sam for help wasn't possible either, not now that he had disappeared. Purpled was too much of a risk, too close to the gang...

It wasn't exactly looking like he had many options. *Any* options.

Except...maybe...

There was one other contact. They had only talked like three times, it had been *months* since they had spoken, the man probably didn't even remember him, but...

It was worth a shot.

And that was how Tommy ended up deep in the Underground at 0300 in the morning, standing in front of the massive wooden doors to Quackity's fine business establishment.

"Quackity?" Tommy nudged open one of the casino's oak doors, "I know it's been a while but I need a favor man, I've--"

Tommy caught sight of the inside of the casino. It was dark. Silent.

Empty.

But that wasn't right. That wasn't right at all. The casino was never empty. Tommy took a hesitant step into the massive hall. It was usually electric, glowing with vibrant neon signs, ringing with the tinkling bells of the gambling machines, all flashing lights and adrenaline.

Today, it was dim.

"No, no, no." Tommy whispered, running a hand down his face, "First Sam and now this? What is *happening*?"

Surely, this couldn't be the gang, right? It hadn't even been a day. They couldn't have finished checking the Underground yet--unless they had found Purpled and realized he'd caught the last shuttle out. If that was the case, they could have already scoured Eastside. Maybe they'd gotten ahead of him; maybe they'd already taken Quackity down and were just waiting for him to fall into their trap...

No. He was being paranoid. They had no way of even knowing who Quackity was, no way of knowing Tommy had ever been in contact with him. He was fine. Safe, for now. Probably.

"Big Q?" He called, a little more urgent, peering through the dark, "Anyone?"

No response. Nothing at all. Clouds of dust floated through the air.

If this wasn't the gang, then there was only one other logical conclusion. Only one thing that could've happened. Tommy felt the little sliver of hope in his chest begin to wither.

"Shit. What, was this place raided in the three months I was fucking gone? How--how is that even possible?" Tommy muttered, turning back towards the door, "Just my luck. Just my fucking luck. What am I gonna do now? I mean, I can probably hole up here for a day or two, but if the guards come back then--"

"Hello? Is someone there?" A voice cut through the dead, empty silence, so suddenly that Tommy startled back, instantly on guard. It wasn't just that the voice was unfamiliar--something was off with the voice itself. It was...strange. Warped, just a little, and bright, far too *bright* for the clouds of dust and abandoned gambling tables. It wasn't quite *right*, somehow, and it certainly wasn't Quackity, and it set off blaring alarm bells in his mind.

"Uh. Yes?" Tommy's hand hovered over his staff, his eyes scanning the casino for the source. His feet shifted, widening into a fighting stance as his head whipped back and forth. Ready for attack.

And yet...there was no one there. The casino was empty. Completely empty.

He didn't like it. It was never that empty, not even in the middle of the day. There was always someone there, Glow addicts or passed out gamblers who had partied a little too hard the night before or, you know, *Quackity*. It had always been *alive*. Now it sort of felt like the unearthed burial grounds of one of the old pharaohs he had read about in Techno's library. A tomb.

The person, the *intruder*, still hadn't replied back. The casino had gone back to that same vicious, gaping silence as before, so deep Tommy thought it might swallow him whole. It was so lifeless that, for just a second, Tommy almost wasn't sure whether the voice even existed to begin with. Maybe he'd finally cracked.

"Hi?" he said tentatively into the abyss, testing the waters.

"Hello. Is someone there?" The voice repeated, sending Tommy scrambling backwards again. The same voice, with that same *wrongness*, in the same exact intonation as before.

The casino was just too massive. The voice echoed from everywhere and nowhere, reverberating through the hall so he couldn't pinpoint where it was coming from, where the intruder was lying in wait. Tommy was already in the middle of the casino floor--there was little cover for him to hide behind and deep shadows in every direction, leaving him open to attack, practically defenseless...

But he owed at least this much to Quackity, didn't he? The man had arguably saved his life a few times at this point. The least Tommy could do was eliminate whatever thief had decided to stow away in his casino. That way they'd be even--the head of one intruder as payment for saving his own.

If only he could find them. He settled for spinning slowly in place. Searching the shadows for movement. His staff had somehow found its way into his hand. It crackled with electricity.

"Yeah. You already said that." He bit out, glaring at the darkness, "Who the fuck are you anyway, huh? You gonna keep hiding? *Coward*. Come out and face me."

A pause. Then: "Hello. Is someo--"

Bloody hell.

"*Shut up!*" Tommy hissed, "Shut. Up. Either come out or shut your mouth."

He was fed up with this. He'd realized what was wrong now: the voice was just too *happy*. Nobody in the poor districts of Manburg spoke with that kind of joy in their voice unless they were high off Glow, and if you were on Glow you usually weren't inclined to speak much at all, too caught up in whatever dreamland the drug took you off too. He didn't know what the intruder's game was, hiding in the shadows, *mocking* him with this strange glee, but he was sick of it. Prime, he'd almost rather deal with fucking *Wilbur* than whoever this asshole was. At least Wilbur was predictable. Easy to read. The intruder still hadn't emerged from whatever hiding spot they'd tucked away into.

"Fine. Keep hiding then." He snapped, "Doesn't matter. I'll find you eventually, and when I do I'll bash your fucking face in. You don't belong here. I know for a fact that the owner of this place doesn't have any other employees allowed to manage the place on their own. He told me himself."

Something shifted as he spoke, a soft whirring filling the air from somewhere behind him. A gun? Some sort of weapon? Something plasma powered, by the sound of it, which *ugh*, plasma weapons were always annoying as hell to deal with. That shit burnt through anything. It'd eat its way straight through his skin, melt his bones, boil his blood.

Tommy was not a fan of plasma weapons. Didn't matter. They could try whatever they wanted. He'd kick this guy's ass fueled by spite alone.

"Yeah. That's right." Tommy hissed, feeling the eyes on the back of his neck, listening as the whirring inched closer, "You're screwed either way, mate. So why don't you just come on out? Huh?"

Another soft clanging, the sound of metal shifting from behind him. They were close, almost close enough to strike, Tommy just had to wait for them to take a step closer and--

"Hello! Are you an intruder?" A voice chirped--*right next to his ear*.

Tommy panicked.

How had they crept up so quietly? He staggered away, twisting to try and catch sight of them. His feet crossed as he spun, his momentum still carrying him forward, and in the next instant he was on the ground,

sputtering as he tried to catch sight of his opponent and already pressing the button to electrify his staff, "What--what the--hey, stay back! Who--who the hell--?"

And then he saw it.

It--*they*--were both horrifying and oddly...human. They were unnaturally tall for sure, but their proportions were still all fairly ordinary, their limbs all vaguely human, if a little too...metallic to be mistaken for the real thing. Their skin was a mishmash of bolts and nuts, silver and lime green metal parts, and tiny green lights. A small patch on the right side of their chest that read out CH4RL3 S1MCC1, and their head looked like an oval covered in a dark LED screen, lit up to resemble--a face? Wide, lime green eyes, a cheery grin, and--were those pixelated glasses??

A robot. Quackity's casino had been invaded by a robot. And it was wearing glasses.

The LED's that made up the robot's face shifted into an even bigger smile. "Oh my! You're not a threat! Hello there, tiny human!"

The fear that had begun to well up in Tommy's throat shifted into something resembling righteous indignation. Not a threat? *Not a threat?* Tommy shoved himself back onto his feet in a flash, crossing his arms over his chest in a way that definitely wasn't defensive. The robot towered over him by at least a foot, which only increased his frustration. He wasn't about to let himself be talked down to by a piece of machinery, no matter how tall or weird or creepy it was. "No. No way. What the hell are *you*? You're not Big Q. You're not even human."

"Of course I am!" The robot replied, its animated eyes blinking twice (why did it need to blink? It was a *robot*), still with that ever-present digital smile, "My name is S-1-M-C-C-1, but all of my very human friends that exist call me Slimecicle for a fun little human nickname! Dap me up!"

The robot held out his hand towards him in a fist and Tommy jerked away from it, staring at it suspiciously. Was this some sort of...attack? A threat? "Do...*what*?"

"Dap me up!" The robot repeated in that same cheery inflection, still holding out his fist, and in that instant Tommy decided that even if he had known what the hell "dap me up" meant, there was no way he'd be going anywhere near the android any time soon.

"What? No. What?" Tommy was more than a little bewildered. Was this some sort of Lights lingo he was unaware of? A proposition for a duel?

"Dap me up!" The robot insisted.

Yeah, that was going to be a no for him. The android was weird as hell. For one, he kept insisting he was actually human--that was just evidently, plainly false and clearly some sort of AI-gone-rogue glitch messing with the bot's software--but also the thing just kept standing there, *smiling*, like a complete psychopath. What was he smiling about? What was so damn funny about the gloomy, abandoned casino? It was *creepy*.

"That doesn't--that doesn't help me, idiot, why are you--" Tommy spluttered, taking a step back that the robot instantly matched with another step towards him, "Get away from me, I'm not gonna--"

"Dap me up!"

"*Holy shit*." Tommy gasped. "Holy shit, *fine*."

He didn't--he didn't have *time* for this. He needed to find Quackity, not sit here arguing with some sort of defective robot with delusions of sentience, but the dumb thing just wouldn't *budge*, and so Tommy's hand snapped out to nudge against the robot's metallic fingers.

"There. There! You happy? Dear Prime!" Tommy hissed.

"Yeah! I'm happy!" Slimecicle cheered. Tommy glared at him so hard it was a miracle he didn't spontaneously combust. The robot either didn't notice or didn't care. Probably the former--the bot didn't exactly seem like the sharpest knife in the illegal weapon's shop. Tommy had heard about some of these "sentience" glitches before, and they usually ended up with the bot either self-destructing as they began to truly comprehend the horrors of humanity, or with them going full "purge the world of its filth" and going on a murderous rampage. So. Probably for the better that the robot didn't seem to have an understanding of humans just quite yet.

"Now who are you searching for? I can check my databas--I mean. My phone book--" Slimecicle corrected quickly, and Tommy rolled his eyes--he wasn't fooling anybody. "--for their contact information and we can get you back to your owner, little child."

Oh no. No, no. That was where he drew the line.

"My owner? *My owner?*" Tommy snarled, "I'm not a fucking kid."

Slimecicle ignored him completely, grinning down at him. "No, you must have misinterpreted me, I did not ask your age. Let me repeat my query for you. What is your owner's name again, child?"

"You--you're the fucking robot!" Tommy growled. "I should be asking this to you!"

Slimecicle's wide green eyes flashed to two pixelated question marks. "What? Nooo. I'm a human. Just like you. See? I have bones. And flesh. Just bones and flesh. A robot? I'm not a...what's a robot? Who even knows? Not me."

That was it. That was *it*.

"What the fuck. What the *fuck*. Of course I get stuck with this. Can't have one thing go right, I swear, of course my luck gives me the glitched out AI. Sam's probably *dead* and Wilbur's *hunting* me and now I have to--*fuck*, where is Quackity you *useless* piece of *scrap metal*, I--"

The robot burst into tears.

Well. Not actual tears. It was still a robot after all. Still, there were blue pixels streaming down his face and he was making a sound reminiscent of a cat with anger issues, so Tommy figured that was what he was going for.

"Oh my Pri--now he's--you have got to be shitting me." Tommy sighed, exasperated, and Slimecicle began to sob harder, curling into himself and putting his head in his hands.

And Tommy...Tommy began to feel guilty.

Look, he got that by all the known laws of AI this show of emotion wasn't real. AI couldn't feel actual emotions, everyone knew that, it just...Slimecicle was doing a really good job of making it *look* like he could, okay? The crying was convincing, and Tommy's conscience was putting him through the ringer. Self-respect (he was not going to apologize to a *robot*, of all things) and guilt (he had literally been so mean that he had made a heartless animatronic feel actual human sadness, how was that even possible) warred: guilt won out.

Tommy winced. "Okay, no wait, you don't have to--stop crying would you? It, it's okay dude. Oh my stars, I can not believe I am comforting a *robot* right now--"

"*I'm not a r-robot.*" The *robot* managed to say around his surprisingly human-like sobs and a fresh wave of shame jolted through Tommy.

"Holy--no, no I didn't mean it, I didn't mean it. Uh. There, there..? It's alright, buddy. Can you stop crying?" The robot kept sniffing, letting out tiny whimpers of sadness. Tommy shifted uncomfortably. "Dude. Please.

Seriously. Stop crying."

Prime, this was so awkward. What were you supposed to do when people cried again? He didn't know how to comfort people. When you were in Eastside you didn't show signs of weakness as obvious as crying, not unless you wanted to die or get robbed blind. He'd never had to deal with this before. What was he supposed to say, that he was wrong? Like, he wasn't. Not at all. Slimecicle wasn't human.

Still, he'd do anything to end this. If Slimecicle kept bawling any longer Tommy might actually just wither up and die.

"I really didn't mean it. Really." Tommy lied.

A teary green eye peeked out from behind one of the robot's metallic hands. "Say it then."

Tommy blinked. "What?"

"Say that I'm the--the most fleshy human you've ever met."

"I--" He was not going to say that. No way was he going to say that.

The robot's pixelated lip began to wobble.

Fuck.

"Oh my Prime, I can't believe I'm about to--" Tommy put his face in his hands and just--sighed. He could not believe he was about to do this. "You are the most fleshy human I have ever had the pleasure of meeting mister Slimecicle."

Slimecicle perked up, looking up from where he had been hiding behind his hands. Every hint of the tears that had been running down his face was gone. "You mean it?"

"Don't make me say it again." Tommy grumbled, "Now, can you show me where Quackity is?"

"Quackity? You are looking for Quackity from Las Nevadas?" The robot asked, and Tommy realized he hadn't ever actually told Slimecicle that that was who he was searching for. At first he'd been too freaked out by Slimecicle, and then too annoyed, and then he'd been groveling for forgiveness for calling him a robot, *which he literally was*.

"So you know him then. Great. Do you know where he is?"

"Of course I do!" Slimecicle chirped, back to his same strange cheer, and Tommy felt hope well up in his chest. And then the robot continued: "Quackity from Las Nevadas is on a very important business trip. That's why he left me here! I'm in charge."

Tommy's eyebrows furrowed. "You're...in charge?"

What idiot had thought that putting *him* in charge was a good idea? You would have to be so incredibly *stupid* to think putting an AI in charge of an entire business was a good idea, especially Slimecicle, whose top priority seemed to be convincing people he was human and not, you know, *running the casino*. What dumb motherfucker would ever even *consider*-

And then Tommy remembered that he was in Quackity's casino, owned by *Quackity*, and everything started to make a little more sense.

"Yes! Right before he left, Quackity from Las Nevadas told me--" The robot's jaw clicked and shifted and then it was Quackity's voice coming out of it, so real, so *him*, that the hope in Tommy's chest surged before he could stop it.

“Okay S1MM.” There was faint rustling in the background of the recording as Quackity spoke, quick footsteps, like he was leaving in a rush. “You’re in charge while I’m gone, okay? You’re one of the most advanced AI systems in the entire world, there is literally no way that it could be too hard for you. Just don’t explode anything.”

Uh. *Explode* anything?? Tommy edged away from Slimecicle. Murderous rampage was seeming more likely by the second.

As if to reinforce his worries, without warning Slimecicle’s head snapped to one side of the room, his eyes locking onto some unseen target, and his seemingly ordinary, typical, human-shaped arm morphed into something round and hollow and glowing with orange light. He lifted it sharply at the darkness and a whirring sound started up from within his body and in the next instant there was a fiery beam of plasma shooting across the room.

Tommy heard the dying screech of some tiny animal, felt the heat of the beam on his skin, and then it was gone, leaving a little, charred, smoking pile of ash on the floor halfway across the hall.

Tommy stared at it for a second and then his gaze shot to the robot, who was nonchalantly morphing his arm back from a laser cannon into its human form.

“Rat.” The robot commented mildly to Tommy, like he hadn’t just fried a living creature to dust. “I do not like the rats. They are too wriggly. They nibble on my fingers when I hibernate and--”

Quackity’s wry voice started up again as the recording resumed. “Don’t fuckin’ trash the place while I’m gone. Leave the casino shut down until I get back, you don’t need to do anything but guard, and I mean *anything*. Seriously. Just uh. Stay shut down. Maim or kill any intruders, yada yada yada, you know the deal buddy. And for the love of Prime, don’t start getting it in your head that you’re a human again, I swear that fucking glitch is gonna be the e--”

The recording clicked off abruptly. Tommy had an inkling he knew why it had cut off so suddenly.

Slimecicle smiled anxiously. Little blue, pixelated beads of sweat ran down the side of the robot’s face-screen. “Yep. Yep. That was it. Nothing else. I’m all flesh and bone. And human. Of course.”

“Sure you are buddy.” Tommy said with an uneasy grin. Prime, when this robot achieved full sentience it was going to be the death of them all.

Hey, he wasn’t going to get on the guy’s bad side now that he knew Slimecicle could *explode* him. Quackity had made it sound like the robot was decked out in fucking *missiles*, not to mention the entire laser arm thing. Slimecicle could have said he was a *rock* and Tommy wouldn’t have argued.

“So do you know where Quackity actually is? Where I could find him?” He asked instead.

“Nope! He said he would be gone for a few months and by my calculations it’s been.” His animated voice cut out to something more robotic, “--43 days, 13 hours, 5 minutes, and 26 seconds--” and then went back to his normal gleeful tone, “Since he left. He could honestly be anywhere! The Underground is a big place, little human. Even with all my processors put to work there would be no chance of locating him! Does that help?”

Tommy stared at him.

The little spark of hope in his chest turned to ash. Tommy sank to his knees.

“Fuck.” Tommy whispered, “*Fuck.*”

The wide smile on Slimecicle’s face shifted into something remarkably close to concern.

“You are upset?” He asked. Tommy's head fell into his hands. “I have upset you. Was it my bones? Or the rat?”

Quackity wasn't there. His last contact, his last option, and he wasn't even there.

Pathetic. They weren't real. You really think we would need some street kid? Worthless. Wilbur hissed.

"I am so fucked." Tommy breathed.

“Little human? Are you alright?”

Tommy barely even heard him, too caught in his own thoughts. “I'm going to have to go back to the streets, and then I'm going to run out of Primes, and I'll have nowhere to stay and no food to eat, and I'll know if I try to get work the gang will find me so I'll be right back where I started--unable to do my job, losing the power of my name with each passing day--and eventually I'll just wither up there like one of the Glow addicts who sit there and rot and I'll die or get kidnapped or worse, found by Dream, and I'll end up wish--”

A hand settled onto Tommy's shoulder. “I am sorry I have distressed you. Is there something I could do to make it better? I--I am very sorry little human, I do not know--do not cry, please, I do not know how to handle tears, oh, oh no, please tell me what I can do to make you feel better.” The voice hesitated. “Dap me up?”

Tommy let out a wet laugh. “Unless you have a portable charger installed in there to give my laptop an external power supply, there's not much else you could do big man.”

“A charger port, you say?” A pause. “Speak no more little human. I have saved the day.”

Tommy's head shot up. A panel slid away on Slimecicle's chest to reveal an assortment of charging cords and ports.

“You--” Tommy's eyes went wide. “Holy shit, Slimecicle, you--! Really?”

“Did I help?” Slimecicle asked.

Tommy launched himself towards the robot's chest. “Oh my Prime, you are the most--the most fuckin' human-like man I have ever met Slime. The most. Thank you.”

He plugged his laptop into the little port. Within seconds the starting screen flashed on, and it was only a moment after that that his computer began to buzz with a wave of messages. Good to know he still hadn't lost his touch, at least. It was dumb, but a small part of him had worried that he'd come back as Theseus only to find that nobody had messaged him, nobody had *wanted* him, in all the time he'd been gone.

Useless, Wilbur's voice whispered in the back of his mind.

Tommy shoved it away, shoved it down into the depths of his heart. Wilbur was gone. Tommy didn't need to think about him anymore. There wasn't any point--it wouldn't help him now. He clicked on the chat with his most recent message--the chat room he had with 404 and the Feral Gang--and began to read.

2 months ago

404: We have a job for you Theseus. Let us know when you get off your job, this is urgent. It's big.

He had been a week into his stay at the gang's base when they had sent it. There would never even have been a chance of him seeing it.

7 weeks ago

404: Tell us when you're in need of another job. We have a package we need you to retrieve.

Tommy couldn't help but feel guilty. They'd been searching for him, searching for someone to pull off a job, and he'd probably been fucking *smuggling* with Technoblade.

He never should've agreed to go with them. He never should've agreed to stay.

5 weeks ago

404: Theseus?

Tommy winced.

22 days ago

404: You've been presumed dead by all but two gangs. I hope you know what you're doing. Sapnap says he hopes you aren't dead.

404: We still have that job waiting for you

And then:

20 days ago

404: I hope you aren't either.

The first hints of a smile began to peek through his frown. He remembered how the Feral boys had always thrown in a few extra Primes for a job well done, the lighter that Sapnap had snuck him, all the casual teasing and witty banter.

And that's when Tommy had an idea. His fingers hesitated over the keys for a second, considering it, shaping it into something more.

He began to type.

Theseus: I'm back in town.

Theseus: About that job...how would you feel about a more permanent arrangement?

Hours earlier, half a city away, a gang turned on each other.

"Damn it!" Techno yelled, voice betraying a rare hint of emotion as he slammed a fist against the metal door with a loud clang, "Kid's too smart for his own good. He must have jammed the elevator door somehow. It's not coming back up until we get the Captain out here to fix it."

"Oh." The other muttered. Wilbur. Sitting at their kitchen table, hunched over, his head in his palms.

"Oh?" Techno whirled on him, expression tight with barely-restrained anger, "That's all you have to say for yourself? *Oh*? After all that? After what you said? What are you *doing*, Wilbur?"

Wilbur lifted his head, staring at his hands. "He shouldn't have followed us. Ant is volatile. Dangerous. He got lucky. Anything could've happened in there. He could've been fed to those rats Ant loves to use so much, and we never would've known. It was foolish."

It sounded more like he was trying to convince himself than Techno, but Techno was far too upset to care. He crossed his arms, narrowing his eyes at Wilbur. "And that warranted you telling him everything? Telling

him his jobs were tests? Poor excuse, brother.”

“So? He was going to find out anyway.” Wilbur muttered sharply, finally lifting his gaze to meet Techno’s.

“Not like *that*.” Techno snapped, taking a dangerous step closer, “You called him worthless, Wilbur.”

Wilbur returned the glare. “I called his jobs worthless.”

Techno’s fist clenched at his sides. Another step. “Same thing. It’s the same thing to him and you know it.”

Wilbur rolled his eyes. “How was I supposed to know--”

And Technoblade snapped.

“Don’t lie. Not to me. You knew. You *wanted* to hurt the kid.” he hissed, and in two long strides he was looming over Wilbur, eyes glowing crimson, “Well, I hope you’re happy. You’ve chased him off and now he’s out in the most dangerous part of the city in the dead of night. You finally got what you wanted Wilbur--with Theseus’s luck he’ll be dead by morning, and it’ll be on *your*--”

“Techno.” A sharp voice cut him off. Finally, *finally*, Philza had stepped in.

Far too late. The damage was done. Even if Techno hadn’t finished his sentence, they all knew what he meant. Who he blamed. His words hung in the air.

“I won’t apologize.” Techno muttered, “I’m right. You know it too Phil. I’m right.”

“Maybe.” Phil admitted, and Wilbur physically *wilted*, “But there’s nothing we can do about it now except wait. I’ve alerted the Captain. We will begin our search for Tommy once the elevator situation is resolved. Until then,” His sharp gaze turned to Technoblade, “Let’s not say anything we’ll regret, mate.”

Techno huffed but said nothing.

Wilbur went back to staring at his hands, his eyes dark pools of guilt. “He’ll come back. Surely he knows--he--surely he’ll come back, right? He has to.”

The silence was his only answer.

It was honestly inevitable that he would end up there again. Tommy hated unfinished business.

And if his business in the Bordertowns was anything, it was unfinished. Owing some random kid a life debt? Tommy couldn’t exactly just ignore that. He didn’t like owing people favors. He repaid his dues, so he might as well handle this one while he was on this side of the city. With the gang on his tail who knew how long it would be until he could safely return again.

There was another reason he was there though. One less...pure than his other purpose: Tommy needed allies. Getting the only person in the city who could hack drones on his side didn’t exactly seem like a bad start. Of course, that meant he had to venture back into the depths of the Bordertowns, through a maze of thousands of starving, feral people, half-collapsed buildings, and the ruins of mob attacks, with a pack full of valuable supplies on his back.

The trip had not been a fun one.

"Drone kid? Hello?" Tommy called into the alleyway, "Anyone?"

He was in the small side street he and the other boy had been in last time, when the kid had somehow fried half a dozen drones in the space of seconds. He really hoped the kid was still living there. He wasn't exactly sure how he'd find him if he wasn't.

Something shifted out of the corner of his eye and Tommy whirled around just to see two sharp brown eyes disappear behind a wooden crate twenty meters down the alley.

Bingo.

"Hey. You!" Tommy shouted at him. The alleyway went very carefully still at the sound of his voice and Tommy scowled. "I already saw you, idiot. I know you're back there. You can't hide."

In hindsight, that probably hadn't been the best way to coax a scared kid out into the open. There was no response.

"Hello? Anyone in there?" Tommy called, a little more desperately, "Dude. Drone kid. Bee boy."

"Bees?" An eager voice responded. A wild mop of brown hair peeked out from behind the crate. Of course. He should've known the bees thing would do it. The kid was totally whack in the head.

The eyes were still peering at him curiously.

"Bees?" The boy repeated, and Tommy finally got what he was asking.

"No, there's no fucking bees, holy shit." Tommy grumbled, "I can't believe *that* was what got you to come out. Look, dude. I don't know if you remember but you, uh...you saved my life. I was trying to leave with the--"

"I remember." The kid interrupted, cautiously stepping out from behind his crate, "The boy who thought he could fly. I remember. Idiot."

That--that was not what he expected. He blinked. "What? Did you just call me?"

The boy smiled condescendingly, scooting a little bit closer. "Thought you could climb the Walls. Thought you could fly? Silly boy. You don't have wings. Not the brightest bulb."

The world hated him. He was convinced. First he had to deal with the talking robot, and now he had to deal with this. He should have just left the kid to rot, life debt or not. The boy seemed to realize he'd caused offense, at least. He smiled gently at Tommy. "Hey. It is okay. Not everyone is bright. I like dim bulbs too."

What even was his life.

"I--I am not a *dim bulb* you--" Tommy sputtered, "*You're* the dim bulb, dude."

"Different." The boy hummed. He pushed back his long, unkempt bangs to show Tommy a jagged scar around one of his eyes. The scar had a distinctive star shape, like an explosion had seared the skin. Tommy fought a cringe at the mottled mess that was his eye, the flesh around it still burnt and peeling. Recent, then. Within the last year. "I was zapped. You just want to fly, little bird. Climbed the Walls so you could fly."

Tommy was far too irritated to examine the whole "zapped" comment. He made a mental note to ask the boy about it later when he wasn't being such a major asshole. "I wasn't just climbing the Walls for fun, okay, dumbass? I was on a job, okay. A mission."

The boy snorted. "Mission? Death mission maybe."

The jab hit far closer to home than he expected.

Death missions. Even the boy couldn't possibly know just how true the words were.

Tommy swallowed. His throat had suddenly become very dry. His eyes burned. "Yeah. I get that, okay, but I survived, didn't I? Not a death mission then. Okay, dickhead?"

"Sure." The boy said with a sly smile, "Sure, little bird. If you say so."

Tommy closed his eyes. Pressed his lips together to keep something barbed from bursting out. Inhaled. Forced out a long exhale. He could keep himself from murdering this kid, surely. Surely. He just needed to channel zen or whatever. He couldn't murder him. He already owed him a life debt for the whole saving him from the drones thing. Stabbing the kid would be in bad taste.

"Look. Kid." Tommy gritted out through clenched teeth, "I brought you stuff. As a thank you."

The kid perked up. "Stuff?"

"Bread. Blankets. Some Prime cards. Stuff."

The boy inched closer, clearly interested but still too suspicious of him to fully approach. Tommy dropped his pack onto the ground and kicked it across the alleyway to him. The kid began rummaging through it immediately, humming his approval as he pulled out bits of fabric and electronics.

"I also wanted to...offer you a proposition." Tommy began hesitantly, "I saw your tech. When you...saved me. Handmade, by the looks of it, with foraged scrap metal? It was good. Really good. You just fried those drones like it was nothing."

The boy froze, glancing at him with narrowed eyes. "Point?"

Tommy shrugged, careful to keep his movements nonchalant. He couldn't betray how important this deal was to him. "I have a bit of a business of my own. I could use someone like you on my side."

"What's in it for me?" The kid asked.

Tommy grinned. Maybe they were more alike than he thought.

"Better parts, for one. There's only so much you can make with those scraps. A cut of my Primes. A leg into the Underground. A way out of..." Tommy gestured at the crumbling alleyway, the dusty streets, "This. You can't possibly like the Bordertowns. *Nobody* likes the Bordertowns. How many mobs have broken in the past month alone, huh? Five? Ten?"

The boy didn't respond. He just watched Tommy. Gauging his intentions.

Seemed like his cue to leave.

Look, Tommy knew street kids. He knew how they acted. The kid wasn't going to give in so easily, and pushing on the matter would only make him more distrustful. No, the best course of action was to back off, at least for now. The kid was smart. He'd figure out Tommy was his best option soon enough. "Look. Just...think about it, okay? From one street kid to the next: trust me on this one. You can do something more. Something greater. You can be whoever you want. Start a whole new life. Think about it, man."

Still no response. Tommy turned to leave.

"There's a warehouse on the edge of Westside. Aegis lane. I'll be there, one week's time, 1200. You can meet me there if you reconsider." Tommy told him as he glanced over his shoulder, "You have talent, big man. You're a prodigy. Together we could be something great."

"Tubbo." The boy said as he turned the corner, disappearing from view, "You can call me Tubbo."

Embedded in a lair of stone and steel, not quite a day earlier, a gang realized the truth.

“He’s not coming back.” Techno huffed.

“Or he *can’t*.” Wilbur added, and Techno turned to give him a look.

From the moment it had become clear that Theseus wasn’t going to return, Wilbur had been spewing the same broken theory. Techno knew denial when he saw it. Theseus getting snatched? Sure, the kid was unfamiliar with the Depths, but he was obviously clever. Observant. He could handle it.

Wilbur just wanted a way to avoid the inevitable truth--Theseus had left for good, and it was his fault. Worrying about false threats to the kid’s safety was clearly far easier to him than just acknowledging his guilt.

Techno had never been one to mince words. He said as much. “Look, Wilbur, I get you have a guilty conscience and all, but even Theseus would be hard pressed to get himself kidnapped in the span of two hours.”

“You don’t know that.” Wilbur huffed in reply, crossing his arms and avoiding his gaze.

Techno frowned at him. Yep. Wilbur was deep in denial. “Theseus is smart. You underestimate him.”

“He would have come back by now, Technoblade.” Wilbur hissed, and his glare went hard, “Why aren’t you upset about this? It’s like you don’t even *care*.”

That was the final straw. Wilbur’s delusions about Theseus getting kidnapped he could handle, but he wouldn’t stand being accused of detachment.

“You--you think I don’t *care*?” Techno snapped, “I care. I care more than you could know. I just understand why maybe the kid might want a day away from you. Are you really so sure he would want to come back after what you said, Wilbur? You’re so deep in--”

“Techno.” Phil cut in for the second time that day. Techno’s mouth snapped shut.

“We’ll shut down the Community House just in case, Wilbur.” Phil reassured, meeting Techno’s eyes over the top of Wilbur’s head.

Drop it, his gaze seemed to say.

Techno’s eyes flickered to Wilbur, who had gone back to leaning over maps of the Depths, murmuring to himself, and then back up to Phil.

It’s bullshit and you know it, his glare responded.

I know, Phil’s eyes whispered, *I know. Just let him believe.*

And because of that, because Phil had asked, Technoblade held his tongue.

In retrospect, going back to the warehouse was an absolutely horrid idea.

But that was how the saying went, wasn’t it? Hindsight is 20/20.

To be fair, it hadn’t seemed like such a bad idea in the beginning. Tommy had cut his ties with Skeppy, tried to find Sam, repaid his debts to Tubbo--he was cleaning shop. Getting his affairs in order. The only logical

next step was to try and get his discs back too.

Tommy was sure Dream still had them hidden in the warehouse somewhere. He knew how much they meant to Tommy--surely he had kept them. Dream would never give up blackmail material so easily.

So. Dream had something of his. Tommy wanted it back. Dream wouldn't give it to him willingly. Tommy was a thief. It didn't seem hard to add it all up. The correct course of action seemed pretty clear. The whole idea, in theory, wasn't such a bad idea. It was only when Tommy actually arrived at the warehouse that he started to have his doubts.

The last time he'd been there....

Dream had locked him away. Had told Tommy he would be left there for days. Tommy had screamed until his lungs gave out, saved only by--

Tommy turned the final corner to the entrance of the warehouse and ran right into the chest of the very boy he'd been remembering.

"You--" the boy's eyes went wide, "You're Tommy."

Tommy recognized him of course--how could he not remember the kid who saved him from Dream the last time he was at that very warehouse? The kid's face wasn't exactly forgettable either, with the twisted skin of wires and his glowing, multicolored eyes and how he was still so freakishly tall.

"Uh." Tommy started uneasily. The kid's face still threw him off a bit. "Ranboo, right? Look dude, I don't know how you got in this place but you should get the fuck out while you still can. Someone pretty dangerous lives here and I wouldn't want you to get hurt."

"That's what I was going to say to *you*. You--you can't be here." Ranboo whispered urgently, glancing back and forth like he thought someone would jump out from the shadows at any moment, "You need to leave. Dream, Dream will see, he'll hurt you again--"

Tommy's limbs turned to stone.

It all came rushing back. Sitting on rooftops, tucked into a warm green hoodie, giggling as they chased each other through the city streets, finally pickpocketing his first shopkeep. Then came the cold, the silence, the void of loneliness for years. A burst of joy when he returned. The sharp pain of betrayal when Tommy finally realized he had returned *wrong*. The sheer terror when he locked Tommy away.

"He--he's here?" His voice fell to a shaky whisper. He glanced around the alley, "Dream's here? In the warehouse?"

Ranboo shook his head. "No, not *him*, he--"

The tension left his body.

"Oh. Oh." He breathed, "Thank Prime. Why--why would you say--"

Tommy gasped in a shaky breath.

"He's not here. He's *not* here. Okay." He straightened, honing in on the job at hand. He just needed to focus. As long as he pretended like this was any other job, he would be fine. "I'm going in. Dream has my...he has something important of mine that I need to retrieve. I--thanks for looking out for me. I mean it, I don't know what I would've done if no one had found me in that safe but I just...thanks, Ranboo. You don't need to worry. I'll be in and out no problem. I'll be long gone by the time he even knows was here, trust me, I've had more than a little experience with this kind of stuff and I--"

“No! No, you have to go.” Ranboo hissed, “He’ll see. He’ll know.”

Tommy’s eyebrows furrowed. “I thought you said he was gone.”

“He is, but--”

Irritation jolted through his veins. His discs were so close. He didn’t have time for this nonsense.

“What’s the problem then?” Tommy snapped, and a cold realization jolted through him.

Ranboo had let him out of Dream’s safe. What were the odds he’d be hanging out next to the warehouse again, and at the exact same instant Tommy showed up? It was one coincidence too many.

“You’re not--you’re not working for him, are you? Holy shit, are you--” Tommy staggered away from the kid, “Are you partners? After all that? What, is this another trap?”

Ranboo stiffened. “You need to go. Please. I won’t let you go in there.”

He wouldn’t let Tommy? What, like he’d be able to stop him? Tommy bared his teeth. “Look. Ranboo. I don’t want to have to hurt you mate. Even if you work with him, you really helped me out there.” Tommy’s voice went cold. “But there are things that I need inside of that warehouse. Dream’s not here, the entire place is defenseless, this is my perfect opportunity. Get out of my way.”

The ‘or I’ll make you’ was implied.

“Please, you don’t get it--”

Tommy’s hand clenched around his staff. “Move.”

“Listen to me!” Ranboo screeched.

Tommy went still.

“Look at my face. Look at it. Who--who do you think--who did this to me?” Ranboo asked, staring at him intently, “Who do you think made me into--into some sort of *monster*?”

Slowly, the pieces began to click into place. Who would be cruel enough to mutilate a kid? Who would be cruel enough to make them into *that*?

Ranboo looked away, wrapping his arms around himself. “He--he got in my head. He messed with my mind and I don’t--I don’t even know when I’m the one in control anymore.”

Tommy’s eyes went wide with horror. “What?”

“He...did something. When he did *this* to my face, I--I don’t know, but sometimes it’s like...like he can see. My eyes aren’t my own. And then--my limbs go stiff and my mind gets all confused and it’s like there’s this *cloud* surrounding me. I blink and it’s night and I’m five blocks away and Dream--Dream *knows*. I wake up and he just knows things, and I know it has to--it has to be me. He’s...he’s using me somehow, and I can’t stop it. I can never stop it.” Ranboo whispered, “Sometimes even when I’m the one in control I can feel him behind my eyes. Watching. He’s always watching.”

Tommy couldn’t help it--he took a shaky step back, staring at Ranboo with horror. “Is he--?”

“No. He’s not there. We’re...alone.” Ranboo assured him, and Tommy’s hand drifted away from the holster for his staff.

Tommy hadn’t even realized it was lingering there in the first place.

“Tommy, he’ll kill you. Or lock you away again. You don’t know the lengths he’d go to get--” Ranboo paused for a millisecond before his expression shifted into something frantic. “He’s coming. He’s coming back. I can feel him. Tommy, you need to leave.”

And he would have, Prime knew. Tommy would have left in an instant, the very instant that Ranboo had told him he was being *possessed* by Dream, if not for yet another stupid life debt. Because Ranboo had saved him too, hadn’t he, all those months ago when Dream had locked him up, and he would have to be heartless to leave someone to a life with Dream after they had shown him such a kindness.

“What about you?” Tommy asked, though he was sure he knew the answer. If there was any way Ranboo could leave he would have tried it already, surely. Still, he had to ask. “I can’t just leave you here. I can’t just let him--”

“I can’t leave. I’ve tried. The cloud always comes back and then I’m back here and Dream is *angry*. He’s always so angry.” Ranboo shook his head, his gnarled face contorting into a miserable frown, “You have to go. Please.”

“I--” Tommy began to protest, but Ranboo was still just shaking his head. He hadn’t seemed like one to have a stubborn spirit, but it was clear that on this he wouldn’t budge easily, and they didn’t have the time to hash it out. Leaving Ranboo behind was...it was awful, and cruel, and a better man would have stayed behind with him to bear through it together, but Tommy *wasn’t* a good guy. He was a criminal, and a thief, and he had spent the last ten years sticking out for himself, and one amicable interaction with a somewhat nice kid wasn’t going to change that. Tommy couldn’t be there when Dream took over. He just couldn’t. He wasn’t sure he would survive it.

So he caved.

“Fine.” He murmured, “Aegis Lane. One week’s time, 1200. If the cloud isn’t there, that’s where we meet. Promise me.”

That, at least, would be enough to soothe his guilty conscience. At least then, even if the kid didn’t show up Tommy would have tried. He would’ve done something. And if Ranboo did manage to make it to their meeting? Well, let’s just say Tommy knew a little bee that might be able to help him out. Surely with Tubbo’s skill he could block off whatever transmitter Dream had installed when he messed with Ranboo’s brain.

“Okay. If he’s not there, then--” Ranboo’s body jolted and for a second he went still. One by one, his limbs began to *shift*, just a little, like they were clicking into place. One foot, then the other, then a leg, and further and further up his body, until his entire body was *thrumming*.

His eyes began to glow.

Expression horrified, limbs twitching, one half of his horrible face twisted into an unwilling grin, the boy choked out a single word: “*Run*.”

Tommy didn’t dare to look back.

Far, far beneath the glittering skyscrapers and silver lights, a gang misunderstood.

“He...left?” Techno asked.

Wilbur crossed his arms over his chest. “Unless it was a different scrawny kid with blond hair and blue eyes that somehow snuck onto a shuttle out of the Community House? Yes. Tommy’s gone. He’s back on the surface.”

It wasn't often that Technoblade was confused. He prided himself on having more knowledge than his opponents. He was usually a person of certainty. Of decisive action.

This was not one of those times. Techno blinked. "But...he doesn't even know the shuttles are there. He doesn't even know that's the way out of the Depths. We never told him."

Wilbur gave him a bitter, tight-lipped smile. "Exactly. Techno, how would he even know? He wouldn't know to go there *and* how to get past all the guards by himself! I'm telling you. Someone has him."

And....maybe Techno *had* been too quick to rule out Wilbur's theory. There was still no doubt the whole thing had originated out of Wilbur's guilt, but it was...actually starting to make sense. The pieces fit.

And Techno didn't want to risk it. Not with Theseus.

"You..." He sighed, "I'll send out the Shadows. We'll find him."

Wilbur nodded. "He'll be alright, right? We'll find him?"

"We'll find Theseus." Techno agreed. Vowed.

They did not consider that perhaps Theseus did not want to be found

It was just short of a week later when Tommy found himself standing inside the dimly lit entryway to the Feral Gang's headquarters.

It was a little pretentious if he was being honest. He understood that putting on a grandiose front was important for diplomatic relations and giving the impression of power and whatnot, but even by those standards the gang's entrance hall felt like a little bit much--towering marble columns, an intricate quartz floor, walls carved with murals of wild beasts mid-pounce, tearing out hunter's throats as blood dripped from their teeth.

It was all a little gaudy for his taste.

Still, Tommy wasn't there to critique their architecture, was he? He was there to make a deal.

"Theseus." A man in blue and black overalls and bronze welding goggles greeted. He was sitting on a raised dais of marble, in a throne that looked to be made entirely out of knives (Tommy thought that was a little tacky if he was going to be honest), staring down at Tommy impassively. On each side of his throne stood a guard--an unknown woman, and a different man that could only have been Sapnap, judging by the way he was twirling a match between his fingers.

"404, I presume?" Tommy nodded his head at the man, "It's nice to finally meet my favorite customer in person."

It was one of Purpled's favorite lines to use whenever he was trying to butter Tommy up. He hated to do anything similar to the kid, but even he had to admit it was a particularly effective compliment.

"Please." 404 scoffed, his voice tight and prim and very much exactly like what Tommy imagined it to sound like, "Enough with the pleasantries. I trust you understand the details of our agreement? We'll provide room and board, of course, but you'll get extra funds for every job you complete. 2000 Primes a pop, we'll say? That's alright with you?"

Tommy nodded. "We have a deal then?"

"Deal." 404 agreed, gesturing at Sapnap, "Sapnap, show him to his--"

“Wait.” Tommy cut in, “First I have to...show you something.”

An awkward pause.

404 cocked an eyebrow. “Proceed.”

Tommy pulled back his hood. He knew the instant they took it in--his springy tufts of blond hair, his bright eyes, his young face--because the room went silent with the shock of the realization.

Tommy bit his lip, staring at the ground.

Moment of truth. This was it. Would they turn him away? Relegate him to some entry level job as a cook or a trainee? Or...

Familiar cackles echoed in his mind. A wild cackle, a soft, huffing titter, a single little heh let out on an exhale. And then, as always, their voices. Their words--*weak why would we ever need you, useless worthless child, you idiot, pathetic*--echoing in his mind.

Would they laugh at him?

“Theseus is a kid?” Sapnap whispered from his spot next to the throne and Tommy couldn’t help but glance up to gauge their reactions. 404 just stared at him, his jaw fully dropped like even he hadn’t seen this coming. Sapnap’s eyes were wide. The other guard, the one on George’s right, was just whipping her head between the three of them, back and forth and back and forth, like she couldn’t believe this was happening and was trying to share her incredulity with the others. Or like she thought that Tommy was lying and he wasn’t actually Theseus.

It was not exactly promising. Tommy braced himself.

And then, suddenly, *loudly*, Sapnap burst out with, “That is insane. That is so fucking cool, dude, let’s go!”

Tommy’s jaw dropped. He glanced around in bewilderment. Was he being punked or something? What was going on?

Meanwhile, Sapnap was giving 404 literal puppy dog eyes. “Can we keep him Gogs, please? Pretty please?”

Was..had Sapnap just called 404, the 404, *Gogs*? They weren’t even phased by the whole kid thing. Sapnap wanted to...“keep him”? Like a pet? Tommy wasn’t sure whether he should be angry or thrilled. He was caught somewhere between appalled, desperate, hopeful, and, more than anything, confused.

404 frowned, eyeing him. “I don’t know...”

“Come *on*, George.” Sapnap pouted, and, *well*, Tommy apparently just knew the gang leader’s *name* now. “He’s worked for us a thousand times. We’ve wanted him in our ranks for years.”

George sighed, clearly just tired of the entire conversation. “Fine.”

“Yes! Let’s go!” Sapnap shouted, and in three long strides he was at Tommy’s side, already dragging him deeper into their base, “I am going to be such a bad influence. What do you want to learn first, kid? Pyrotechnics? *Bombs*?”

“Welcome to the family, Theseus.” George said from behind them, from atop his throne of knives, “Don’t disappoint me.”

Sapnap rolled his eyes. “Don’t listen to him dude, George is a major bitch.”

George frowned. He seemed to do that a lot. “And your superior officer.”

“See what I mean? He pulls the seniority card whenever he's losing an argument. Total bitch.” Sapnap whispered conspiratorially, before raising his voice and shouting over his shoulder, “Let’s be real George, one of us is submissive here and it’s not me.”

George scoffed. “You’re right, it’s your mother.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.” Sapnap snipped back, “Make it make sense, George.”

“Jerk.” George hissed.

“Bitch.” Sapnap barked.

“Idiot.”

“Dumbass”

Tommy looked between the two of them. “Should I go or...?”

“Settle down kid, just give me a minute to work my magic.”

Tommy rolled his eyes, pulling himself away from Sapnap’s grip and stalking away. “Okay, so I’m gonna go then...”

“No, wait--” Sapnap called, turning away from his argument with George to catch up with Tommy.

“You’re right Thesues. We will go.” Sapnap said, throwing an arm over his shoulder, “Because we’re more mature than you, George. We don’t need to throw around petty insults, because we *know* we’re the bigger person.”

George gave Sapnap a smug grin. “Funny, I was under the impression you were actually the...smaller of the two of us here.”

Sapnap gasped. “How--how dare you. *Fuck. You.* You wear platforms, idiot, it’s not fair unless we compare height on level footing.”

Dear Prime. He’d teamed up with idiots.

“Don’t worry about him.” Sapnap grumbled as he pulled Tommy away, through a doorway and into the base, “He’s pathetic.”

And just like that the warm feeling that had begun to rise up in his chest disappeared without a trace.

Pathetic. Wilbur’s voice again.

Tommy went numb. Even with Sapnap’s arm slung over his shoulders, wild fire dancing in his eyes as he dragged Tommy through the base to give him a tour, the feeling lingered. A void in his chest. A hole in his heart.

Nine years. Nine years he had spent on the streets of East Side. Nine years of cruel truths and harsh realities and broken trust, nine years of running from guards and going hungry and sleepless nights, of molding himself from a soft, rowdy child into something serrated and fierce and unstoppable.

He had been with the gang for almost three months. That was all it took.

Three months and he had let down the walls he had spent so long building up around himself. He had given up all his protection. He had begun to tell them the truth. How much longer would it have been before he

gave in completely? How much longer before he spilled his darkest secrets? Before he told them about Dream? About his *parents*?

Three months. That was all it had taken for him to defy every instinct, every safety measure that he had spent years reinforcing. That was all it had taken to start trusting them.

And look how that had turned out for him.

Pathetic. Wilbur whispered in his mind.

Tommy felt numb. Sapnap was still talking to him, still gesturing wildly at the base, dragging him through the halls, but he couldn't understand his words, wasn't processing as he was pulled from room to room. There was just Wilbur's voice, echoing in his mind. Telling him he wasn't worth it. Even with its venom, he couldn't help but miss it. Miss them. He hated himself for it, but he missed them.

Distantly, Sapnap's mouth was still moving, his face stretched into a feral grin. A man with a mop of fluffy brown hair walked past them, curled in a vibrant purple and blue hoodie, and Sapnap turned, speaking to him, taunting him, and then he turned to Tommy and--

Head thrown back in raucous laughter, Sapnap turned, gave him a teasing look, and punched him in the shoulder.

It was nothing. A playful half-punch at worst, clearly meant to be joking and gentle and maybe if Tommy had understood the words coming from Sapnap's mouth he would have laughed too, but, as it was, he hadn't-- he had been too caught up in his own head, and when Sapnap nudged him Tommy...

Tommy flinched away.

Sapnap froze, staring at him. A second's pause, and his mouth turned down at the edges, and oh, he had surely noticed something was wrong, because his grip around Tommy's shoulder loosened ever so slightly, his lips parting to question it, to ask--

"I'd like to go to my room." Tommy muttered, and Sapnap blinked.

"You... Theseus, are you..." There was a question in his voice, just a little too soft, a little too gentle. Tommy tensed--he wasn't sure how to answer if the man asked him what was wrong--and the man paused, sensing his discomfort.

"My room. You said I would get a room, right?" Tommy asked, after a moment of silence.

"Yes." Sapnap replied. Tommy refused to look at him, but he could still see the man watching him from his peripheral vision, could feel those amber eyes peering at him. "Uh. Yeah. Here, let me show you. I'm sure you're tired."

Sapnap showed him his room. It was nothing special--gray walls, gray floors, a small cot, and a desk--nothing compared to the room Techno had made for him with its four poster bed and thick, soft rugs, and comical amount of red, but it was functional. Warm. It was something. It was enough.

It was *enough*.

He needed to forget about them. He needed to forget about the Depths. Wilbur and Techno and Philza...they weren't his team. They weren't his anything.

Pathetic. Wilbur's voice hissed

He wouldn't think about them anymore. He wouldn't linger on it. *They* betrayed *him*.

Useless.

He was safe. He was happy. He could work. He could prove himself. It would be better here.

Completely worthless.

It had to be.

Somewhere not so far away, a gang was trying not to panic.

“Where is he?” One of them hissed, the one with sharp eyes and the long trenchcoat and the black voice of a poet, “Techno, where *is* he?”

“I don’t know.” The second forced out through gritted teeth, his hand clenched around the handle of a steel broadsword, tight enough that his knuckles were bone-white. “It’s like he dropped off the face of the planet after he left Eastside. I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? *You don’t know?* Your entire job is to fucking know.” The first snapped back. His hands shook under the cuffs of his trench coat. “I swear to Prime, Tech, if something happens to him, if something happens to *my* thief, *my* recruit--”

“Our. *Our* recruit.” The second cut in sharply, “And don’t try to put this on me.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

The second just huffed. “Are we really going to go through this again? I think you know exactly what I mean, Wilbur.”

The first man bared his teeth. “No. No I don’t. Please, elaborate for me.”

“Fine. You want me to elaborate, Wilbur? Fine.” The second finally snapped, throwing his hands into the air, “Maybe if someone had just kept their mouth shut the kid wouldn’t be in danger in the first place. Ever think of that, Wilbur? That maybe Theseus wouldn’t be out there, all alone, *in danger*, if you hadn’t come up with the *tests* in the first place, if you hadn’t *insisted--*”

“Boys.” The third, the eldest, the one who had sat by until now, deep in thought, interrupted. “Stop bickering. We’ll find him. It won’t be long. The city is only so big. Wherever Theseus is, he can’t be too far.”

“And when we find whoever is keeping him...” the Angel of Death’s eyes went black, “Rest assured boys, they won’t live to regret it.”

Chapter End Notes

hello ladies and germs hope you enjoyed :))

took a little bit of a break for all my midterms but now we are rocking and rolling and updates should be soon

thank you as always for all the lovely comments, art, and theories

Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Tommy is vibing with the feral boys when--oh no.
warning: slight gore

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A month passed. Then six weeks.

Things were good. Fine. Tommy was okay, even if he wasn't quite entirely content. The important thing was he was alright. Even if some nights he would still lie awake for hours, remembering how on good days Wilbur would ruffle his hair, or Techno would rest his hand on Tommy's shoulder when he was proud, or Phil's gentle praise as they gardened or sewed or cooked, he was getting *better*. He had everything he needed.

The Feral boys were nice, yet distant--and Tommy liked it that way. He didn't want to delude himself into trusting them like he had with the Antarctic gang, so it was refreshing that they treated him as nothing more than another one of their gang members. Respected, valued, but certainly not one of them; Tommy was kept around for his merit, not because he was a security risk or because the gang thought him too incompetent to be on his own. He was their thief first, and their friend second. With the Feral gang, Tommy's relationship was one of strictly business, and it was comforting having that surety on where they stood:

Things calmed down. Tommy finally could roam the city as he pleased, there was no sign of the Antarctic gang, and whispers of his name were already regaining their notoriety in the city's criminal underground. Theseus had made his reappearance. Theseus was pulling off jobs again. Word got around. What more could he ask for? Things were *good*.

So Tommy made his first and only mistake: he let his guard down.

It started when he stopped surveilling the gang's movements, stopped asking his contacts about the whispers of their dealings. Before, he was blind to their movements, completely unable to get information on the gang, but now that he knew of the Depths existence it was easy to get word on their dealings as long as he knew the right people to ask. Mostly, his source was Purpled--he didn't trust the kid not to backstab him, but he trusted every other information dealer far less, and Purpled had helped him before. He'd keep his word for the right price.

For weeks, the kid would report to him every day. Little things: sightings of the gang, the trade deals they had made, whether they had left the Depths, and, most importantly, whether it seemed they had discovered his location, and every day Purpled's answer was the same. No changes in position. No new trade deals. The gang gave no sign of taking action, and they gave no sign of leaving Depths. They gave no sign they cared about his absence at all.

It stung more than Tommy cared to admit, that they had forgotten about him so easily. Perhaps some tiny, foolish part of him had hoped they would search for him, just a little. Clearly, he was wrong. By his second month working with the Feral gang, Tommy had stopped checking over his shoulder every time he went out to do a job. As much as it still hurt to realize, the Antarctic gang wasn't looking for him anymore, if they ever had been at all. There had been no word of them for far too long. Surely he would have received news

they were closing in on his location if they were actually searching for him. Surely there would have been *something*.

So Tommy slowly relaxed. He kept up a few precautions of course, that was just common sense--sensors set up by Tubbo, an escape route that only Ranboo could access, a few pipe bombs that he kept stashed away, just general things. He still slept with a dagger under his pillow. He trained every day. He kept his location off the Underground's network. But that was all.

Tommy stopped watching.

And that was all it took.

Every single guard went completely stiff as Tommy strolled into the massive throne room towards George, lounging on his gilded iron throne.

None of them ever seemed to like him. Tommy had absolutely no idea why. He scowled at each of them as he passed. They glared right back.

"Hey bitch boy, what do you have for me?" he called out to George when he was close enough.

If it was possible, the entire room got even more tense. A few of the guards took a--well, they took a very frankly *aggressive*--step towards Tommy, hands resting on their swords, before other guards stopped them. The man himself just gave a bone-deep, exasperated sigh, like he hadn't quite mentally prepared himself to deal with Tommy today and was regretting ever calling him in to speak.

"Dear Prime," he muttered, rubbing his forehead, before turning his glare toward the boy strolling through his hall like he owned the place. "How many times do I have to tell you?"

Tommy just grinned wider.

George, admittedly, wasn't usually the type of person Tommy would normally enjoy doing business with. He was far too reserved for his taste--he didn't quite match Tommy's energy, didn't really appreciate his brash attitude or snippy jokes, and had a massive stick up his ass. That alone would usually be reason enough for Tommy to intensely dislike someone. It wasn't even just that--George was also absolutely one of the most snooty bastards Tommy had ever met, always commenting about how Tommy needed to be more polite, or sitting up on his throne like some sort of king, or holding the fact that he was technically Tommy's superior over him--it was quite reminiscent of how Wilbur used to act, to be perfectly frank.

Maybe that's why Tommy found he didn't actually mind it that much.

Or maybe it was because despite George's snobby demeanor, Tommy could tell he cared. It was there, in the way that he so carefully took care of all of his guards and workers, or how his smiles came so much easier when Sapnap was acting idiotic, or how he would only drop his formal manners to throw back playful insults at Karl. Even if he tried to hide it, Tommy could tell George thought of his gang as his family.

George was a frigid bitch, but he was a *kind* frigid bitch, and that sort of made up for everything else.

George frowned at him. "Sir. It's sir. Not bitch boy, not 'Gogs', not *big man*. You can call me 404 or sir, Theseus, and don't even act like you don't know that."

"Right, Gogy, of course." Tommy replied amicably, ignoring the man's scowl, "What jobs do you have for me this week?"

George stared down at him, raising an eyebrow. "I just want to make sure you understand that you are surrounded by two dozen guards that are all at my command."

What, was that supposed to be some sort of threat? As if. As much as George hated to admit it, he was a massive softie--he wasn't *actually* going to sic his guards on Tommy, even if he was mildly annoying and just a tad insubordinate--and even if he did, Tommy could probably take down half of them before they got close enough to touch him. One little tap of his staff and they'd be out for a day.

"Yeah, yeah, hurry it up bitch, I got things to do." Tommy groaned, and perhaps that was a little too far because within the space of a breath half of the guards in the hall had their weapons drawn and pointed at Tommy. One particularly ambitious fellow went to press a sword to Tommy's neck and George's eyes widened.

"Oh my goodness Matthews, don't actually stab the kid, he's harmless." He hissed, shooing the man off.

Matthews hesitated for just an instant, as if he was considering the pros and cons of just ignoring the order and putting his blade through Tommy's neck anyway, and George scowled. "You heard me, stand down."

The sword fell away from his neck, albeit reluctantly, and Tommy glanced over his shoulder to grin evilly at the guard. Matthews glowered, clearly still debating the benefits of stabbing him. Tommy not-so-subtly stuck out his tongue at the man and flipped him off. When he turned back to face George, the man was raising a reproving eyebrow at him.

"And you." George pointed at Tommy, "Don't antagonize the guards."

Tommy gave him an angelic smile, fluttering his eyelashes innocently. "I would never."

"Sure. Whatever." George huffed, clearly not at all convinced, "Onto what you're actually here for: your jobs. Everything went smoothly last week, I'm sure?"

The smug grin fell from Tommy's face, his stance shifting into something far more professional. Say what you will about his attitude, Tommy was serious about his job. He nodded. "Of course. Shipments were transported to our armory with no issues whatsoever, the renegotiated deal with the Hermit gang turned out twice as profitable after I got that blackmail, and I intercepted two TechCorp packages with enough parts to last the mechanics for another month."

George hummed, clearly satisfied with the answer but trying hard not to show it. "Very well. I trust you're still finding all of your accommodations well enough?"

Tommy met his eyes with a confused look. What was that supposed to mean?

George's expression softened. "You're...happy here?"

Tommy went still. His thoughts raced. His pause lasted a second too long.

"...George, why don't we get to the jobs?" He replied instead, "What do you have for me this week?"

George eyed him for a moment, and Tommy realized another thing he didn't like about the man--it always felt like he knew too much. Like he saw past Tommy's words and straight to the core of his being. His eyes had a light in them that was too clever for comfort. Tommy prayed he wouldn't question it, wouldn't press for anything more. He was perfectly happy continuing to dodge all of their personal questions, just as he had done for the last two months.

After another moment of the silence, George seemed to realize he wouldn't be getting anything else out of him and continued. "Not much. A package interception from the Origins boys, listening in to one or two meetings from the other Westside gangs--"

A dull thud cut them off, echoing from somewhere outside the room and George and Tommy let out an exasperated sigh in unison. Even the guards seemed to visibly deflate. Everyone knew what that noise meant.

“Sapnap.” Tommy groaned.

George rolled his eyes. “What do you think he’s blown up this time? Can’t possibly be the armory again. The kitchen?”

Tommy forcibly pushed out the air through his teeth. “He better not have. I spent days scavenging to find those eggs, if he’s blown up my bread dough...”

He cut off with a snarl and George let out a rare cackle at the murderous expression flashing across his face. “Oh no, you have my full approval on this one, he’s a complete idiot.”

The words may have been harsh, but they were said with such soft fondness that Tommy knew it was in good spirits. George glanced towards the door leading to the inside of the base.

“You might want to hurry though if you want to catch him in the act. He knows his days are numbered, he’ll just scamper away without cleaning it. The dumbass is a total slob. He probably left the place covered in burn scars--wait,” George screeched out a loud, wheezing laugh like a thought had just occurred to him, “No, no, he probably just left it on fire.”

“No.” Tommy gasped.

George’s eyes sparkled. “Yep. Come on Tommy, you’ve met him. You know how he is.”

Tommy did know. In the nine weeks that Tommy had kept residence at the Feral gang’s HQ, Sapnap had caused approximately thirty two smoke alarm triggers, seventeen different uncontrolled fires, and nine different explosions (‘pyrotechnic incidents’ was what Sapnap called them, but they all knew the truth), and every single time the mess had been left to him and Karl to clean up.

He was already turning towards the door. “*No*. I--I’m gonna *murder* him. Good talk, Gogs--”

“George.” The man corrected.

Tommy ignored him. “But I’ll be going now--”

“I didn’t dismiss you.”

Tommy didn’t dignify that with a response either, already halfway across the room. “So I’ll see you later, big man. Have fun sitting on your throne and staring at the wall or whatever it is you do when I’m not around.”

George sighed, pinching his forehead and mumbling something that sounded suspiciously like “--*accept the thief, Sapnap said, what could possibly go wrong, he said--*”

Tommy snickered, two steps away from the door, reaching out to turn the handle--

Behind him, he heard the abrupt sound of a door bursting open.

It was just Sapnap. That was what he figured: the man really *had* blown up the kitchen, and now he had run into the throne room with some idiotic notion that George would protect him from Tommy’s wrath just because they were friends.

So Tommy made his second mistake: he didn’t even reach for his staff as he glanced towards the noise. He wasn’t on guard at all.

Sapnap wasn’t at the door. He noticed that instantly.

In fact, at first glance, it looked like no one was at the door. There was just the darkness of the room beyond. The guards approached cautiously, hands resting on the swords at their sides. One of them took the lead,

peering out of the room into the abyss. After a second's pause he turned back with a shrug. "All clear. There's nothing out ther--"

A flash of silver cleaved the first guard in two. Right down the center of his body, from his forehead to his abdomen. An entire half of his form *peeled* away as the two halves separated, revealing crimson and mangled flesh and white glimpses of bone, slumping down as what remained of his body collapsed to the floor in a heap of flesh and carnage, and suddenly Tommy couldn't move, he couldn't breath, because somewhere deep inside him he just *knew*. Every instinct screamed, every hair went on edge, and Tommy knew, but he couldn't make himself move. He was just trapped there, staring at the dead body on the floor.

In his peripheral vision the door opened further, and someone, *two* someones, strode into the room. The guards collectively recoiled, raising their swords, Tommy finally tore his eyes away--

And then he saw them.

They were a tempest.

Wilbur's trench coat swirled behind him like a storm, his eyes flashing like lightning. His hair had grown since Tommy had last seen him, curling around the nape of his neck in unruly waves. He looked like how Tommy imagined a pre-Flash soldier--dark leather boots, clothes covered in faint burn marks, a strap of ammunition and grenades strapped across one shoulder. The glasses usually perched on the edge of his nose were gone, replaced by a savage, wild grin, even as he cut down one guard, and then two. The way Wilbur fought--it could only be described as brutal. With a gleaming dagger in one hand and a revolver in the other he was a creature of violent efficiency, stabbing into a guard's gut before yanking the blade out, spinning on one heel, pointing his revolver, and executing another with a bullet through the center of his skull. And on. And on.

The whole time he was smiling. He was *enjoying* it.

Where Wilbur was fire, Technoblade was ice: he appeared as stoic and impassive as usual, the edges of his mouth turned down ever-so-slightly into a frown, but even from across the room Tommy could see his glare was a shade darker than usual, the crimson glow of his eyes shining even through the boar-skull mask covering half of his face. He was dressed in his high-laced boots and snowy tunic and velvet cape painted the color of blood, a shimmering crown sitting on his head, like a tyrant king who had descended from his throne to take part in the slaughter. He killed in a violent dance, his broad sword cutting through one guard after another as he twirled and swung and spun across the floor in a deadly waltz, stepping over bodies and streams of blood alike. There were nearly twice as many guards rushing towards him as Wilbur, all of their swords raised, poised to strike.

They never even stood a chance.

In seconds it was over. The guards--all two dozen of them--were strewn across the hall, dead or dying. Some of them were wailing in pain. Most were missing limbs.

Technoblade brushed a speck of blood off his cheek. Wilbur tucked his revolver back into his belt with a nonchalant hum.

The floor was as red as Technoblade's cloak. A severed hand had somehow flown across the hall to land not three paces away from his hiding spot. Bile surged in the back of Tommy's throat.

It wasn't that he hadn't seen this before. He'd seen countless acts of brutality in his years in Eastside, and even before then, when he was with his parents. He'd seen the drones swoop down and turn a man to bones and dust in seconds, boys years younger than him whipped to a bloody pulp by the guards, merchants cutting fingers off of pickpockets for every trinket they stole. Tommy had seen death.

He just hadn't expected it from the Antarctic gang, somehow. It was foolish, honestly, but at some point during his time with them, he had forgotten the gang were...well, to put it frankly, cold-blooded killers.

They were dangerous, he knew that. Of course he knew that. They were terrifying and powerful, and of course he knew in the back of his mind that they had killed, but *seeing* it in front of his eyes, watching them cut down an entire squadron of guards so *brutally*...

It was jarring. Horrifying.

Tommy had killed before. He knew what it was like to have blood on his hands, and he certainly couldn't judge them for silencing their enemies, but...doing it so cruelly, *relishing* their pain like that...

He was going to be sick.

From outside of the room came the soft sound of metal clicking against metal--the sound of *feathers*--and another man stepped into the hall.

Death incarnate. His wings spread to their full size, a green hat casting a shadow over his face that left his eyes appearing as pools of deep black, his ever-present smile replaced with something far more menacing. His boots tapped out a heartbeat against the cold tile as he strode across the room, and Tommy was frozen, staring at him in a mix of awe and horror. With the golden hair whipping around his head like a halo and his wings flared wide, he looked like something supernatural. An avenging angel. A god.

Philza.

So there they were, the soldier, the king, and the god, and there, halfway across the room, was Tommy.

They hadn't seen him yet. By some mercy of Prime, they hadn't glanced his way.

Or perhaps not a mercy. They hadn't spotted him because their attention was entirely, solely focused on George.

Still, Tommy wasn't about to step into the crossfire, not yet. It was all happening too quick, too rapidly. He needed time to figure out a plan. On pure reflexes he dived behind the marble pillar closest to him just as Wilbur's eyes flickered towards his side of the hall, crouching in the shadows.

Why--what was happening? What did they want? How had they found him? It had been so long that he--he had thought--

What were they *doing* here?

Tommy peeked out from behind the pillar and instantly paled.

A knife, a *feather*, was poised at George's neck.

Somehow in the space of a few panicked thoughts, the gang had made their way across the entire wall and up onto the dais to loom above the man, Philza at the front, Wilbur at his left hand, Technoblade on his right.

George was being cornered on his own throne.

"I'm going to ask you this one time and one time only." Phil whispered, his voice a scythe, his glittering, wicked feathers skimming against George's throat.

Tommy wasn't sure how he managed to keep an even expression, sitting there cornered in his own throne with the three of them looming over him, weapons drawn and expressions as vicious as a summer's storm, but George's face was solemn, unafraid, undisturbed, even as the first drop of blood trickled down his neck.

"Where is he? Where is our thief?" Phil snapped and his wings flared out to cast a menacing shadow over him. "Where is Theseus?"

There was a long, terrible pause. Tommy held his breath.

George, despite some of his associates (cough, *Sapnap*, cough), was good at his job. He took it seriously. To all outside appearances his face remained completely impassive. Not even a trace of recognition at the words. Tommy, though, wasn't an outsider, not anymore. He could see the uncertainty in his gaze, the confusion in the furrow of his eyes. He could see the way George's gaze was fighting not to flicker over toward his hiding spot.

George knew he was in here. He knew these vicious, cold-blooded men were after Theseus.

He could sell Tommy out. It would be so easy. All it would take was a nod of his head, one too-long glance his way, and he could have the serrated blade far away from his jugular. Hell, the gang would probably reward him. Riches, connections, trading partners, George could gain so much for himself, for his *family*, from the gang. All he had to do was give up Tommy.

It seemed inevitable. Tommy held his breath and waited to be betrayed. Waited for George to tell them of his hiding spot not twenty paces away.

But George didn't do that. He didn't do any of that. Instead, he kept his face carefully, perfectly neutral, and in his delicate, pretentious voice said, "I can't *possibly* fathom who in the world you are talking about. I don't know what business you have, gentlemen, but it's certainly not with me."

Tommy wasn't sure how someone could manage to look down on a person with a knife at their throat, but George was certainly pulling it off well.

"Don't lie." Wilbur snarled, taking a step closer, so he was just behind Phil's wing. "We know he's here."

"You really want to do this? You want to test us?" Technoblade grunted at the same instant, leaning against his sword. Drops of crimson rolled off it, staining the floor.

Philza stayed silent. He didn't need to speak. His message was certainly clear enough with the feather still poised centimeters away from George's throat.

George frowned, holding his ground. "Don't mistake me for a coward. I won't be intimidated by paltry shows of strength. You can't intimidate me into betraying my people."

Wilbur's mouth twisted into a snarl, his lips parting to say some poison, his hand moving toward the revolver at his side--

Philza held out a hand. Wilbur froze.

"So you won't speak then? You refuse to tell us anything?" Phil asked quietly, gentle as the first kiss of frost on grass, soft as a final breath, so incredibly similar to how he used to speak to Tommy, and yet so different, so much colder.

George held his gaze. "Yes."

"Then you're of no more use to us." Phil whispered, his eyes freezing over, and before Tommy could blink the wing was arcing down towards George's throat.

Tommy didn't think. He didn't process. All he saw was the silver feathers slicing down and suddenly the dagger he kept hidden in his boot was gripped in his hand; in the next instant, cutting through the air; then crashing into Philza's wing in an explosion of sparks.

It wasn't enough to damage the wings, not by any means, but it was enough to alter its course from George's neck. It was enough to catch their attention.

Phil's gaze collided with his own.

Tommy scowled. "What the *fuck* are you doing here?"

For a terrible moment, the hall was still. The three of them stared at him, at Tommy with his wide blue eyes, clearer than they had been in months, and his blond hair poking up in every direction from when Sapnap had tackled him in sparring, and his new boots George had gifted him when he realized he had tears in the soles.

Tommy saw the moment when the realization hit. Wilbur's breathing hitched. Technoblade blinked, *twice*, which was about the same level of shock as any other person jumping a foot into the air. Philza's entire body recoiled.

"Tommy." Wilbur gasped, and then they descended.

Techno was the first to reach him, dropping his sword to the ground with a clang, pulling off the boar skull mask in one smooth motion as he swooped Tommy into his arms and tucked him close to his chest.

Tommy's mind stilled. He didn't move. He hardly breathed.

"Theseus." Techno breathed, and his hand came up to support the back of his neck like he thought Tommy might disappear if he let him go for even a second.

Tommy, curse his lack of self control, didn't pull away. He practically melted into the hug.

And then, before he could blink, he was being passed into another set of hands and it was Philza who was leaning over him, brushing his hair out of his eyes, palms cradling his face gently, murmuring his name. His wings, so lethal, so sharp, curled lightly around Tommy as if to shield him from the outside world, and then Phil was surveying him, tilting his head and checking his arms like he was checking for injuries. Still whispering to him fervently in a stream of words that Tommy couldn't process, a hand sunk into his hair, scratching softly at his scalp.

For just a single, mindless moment, Tommy let himself bask in it.

Over Phil's shoulder, Wilbur met his eyes.

Tommy came to his senses.

He shoved himself away from them, scrambling back. His staff found its way into his hand, already crackling with blue lightning, and then he was desperately whipping it between them, warding them away from him.

"Stay away from me." He gasped, trying desperately to catch his breath, "Don't---don't touch me."

A flurry of emotions flashed across the gang's faces--worry, mostly from Philza, confusion from Technoblade. *Guilt* from Wilbur. The man looked away.

Philza cocked his head at him, eyes sad and gentle. "Tommy?"

Tommy shook his head frantically, still stumbling away. "No. No, no, you don't get to--you don't get to come in here and *Tommy* me, not when you--"

Not when there was an ocean of blood pooling on the floor ten paces away. Not when they had made so many promises and broken them so quickly. Not when they had lied.

Techno took a slow step closer to him, something distraught passing across his face, and Tommy *hissed* like a feral animal, “*Stay back.*”

“Theseus,” George started, wiping away the drop of blood trailing down his neck with the back of his hand, “Who are these people?”

Who *are* they?

Idiots. Possessive, volatile idiots, was what Tommy wanted to say, but even if it was true that wasn’t what George was asking, not really, and so Tommy rolled his eyes, opened his mouth to respond and--

Drew a blank.

He couldn’t tell him they were the Antarctic gang, could he? Phil liked to have them operate under total anonymity. If Tommy told George who the three strangers looming over him actually were, the gang would probably kill him, and the rest of the Feral gang for good measure. Tommy didn’t want that. Tommy would never want that.

The Antarctic gang was out. So what was left? How could he possibly explain them in a way that wouldn’t raise eyebrows?

Employers? No, that wouldn’t make sense. Why would his bosses come all that way for an employee, why would they threaten George as if it was so...personal?

Friends? That wouldn’t exactly excuse their behavior, and it wouldn’t explain why they were looking for him. He wouldn’t run away from friends. He wouldn’t have disappeared without telling them a thing. They would know he was there, not storm into the room swinging.

Shit. His pause was lasting far too long to be plausible. George was still staring at him, waiting for his answer, and though they did a good job of pretending they weren’t, Tommy could see one of Techno’s ears twitching in his direction, Wilbur’s gaze flickering over to him, Phil’s wings going tense. The gang was listening in too. Waiting.

He needed an explanation and fast, something that would excuse their fierceness and explain why they would be searching for him all at once, something like--

Only a single plausible response came to his mind.

“George,” Tommy began, “Meet my family.”

Chapter End Notes

hope you all enjoyed :)) next chapter will be out on monday at the latest

thank you as always for the kudos, comments, and art theyre so incredibly sweet and motivate me so much

also i have a twitter now @_crystalskiez (i know, i know, i thought i was above twitter too but clearly not) pls give me clout

Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

the antarctic gang must deal with the consequences of their actions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

As soon as the words left his mouth he knew they were a mistake.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tommy could see them. Techno's chest puffing up, Wilbur's expression morphing into a small, wild smile, Phil's wings *shifting* like how a bird's feathers might ruffle. Their gazes had locked onto him again in a way that was all too familiar and all too uncomfortable--a mix between pride and approval, victory and relief.

Why would he think calling them family was a good idea? How had that been his best option?

The most alarming part was: he couldn't tell if the change in their expressions was because they had liked his excuse, or because they were enjoying contemplating tearing his guts out. All this time and he still couldn't get a read on them--their expressions might have screamed joy, but who really knew? He had thought he understood them before, and then they had turned around and scorned him and his life's work. You could never really tell, could you?

There were much more important things to worry about though, things like ensuring George didn't order him executed on the spot. Tommy rushed up to the dais, only glancing at the gang to shoot a single, warning glare their way--an expression that very clearly said *shut the hell up and let me do damage control*.

The carnage was directly in front of George's throne. There was no getting around it.

It wasn't that Tommy wasn't familiar with death. He'd seen it, heard it, caused it. That didn't mean he had to like it. That was the real danger, wasn't it--becoming okay with it. With that brutality.

Tommy forced himself not to glance towards the floor as he crossed the hall. The soles of his boots were stained red by the time he made it up to the throne. George's eyes were cold when Tommy stood in front of him, dipping into a deep bow. For once it wasn't mocking.

He kept his eyes trained on the ground. "Forgive me, sir."

There was a sharp hiss from behind him at the words. Clearly, the gang didn't appreciate him being so deferential to someone else, but honestly, Tommy couldn't care less. They had already caused enough trouble. He could deal with their issues later. Right now he needed to convince George not to throw him--and by extension, them--into a prison cell to rot for the rest of their lives.

"I am so, so sorry, if I had any idea they would come in here and--" The words hung in the air. Tommy stared at the red on his shoes. "I would've been long gone by now."

It was a half-truth. Admittedly, his motives for the apology were...tainted. The gang might not care about their relationship with the Feral boys, but Tommy still wanted a job after all of this drama was said and done. If that meant kissing up to George, he would do it. The man sort of deserved an apology anyway, after

Wilbur and Techno had ruthlessly taken out half of his personal guard. The guards hadn't liked Tommy, and the feeling had certainly been mutual, but they didn't deserve to go out like that.

George raised a cold eyebrow at him. "You said they're your family?"

The underlying question was clear: *who the hell are you to have a family like this? Why did they murder an entire squadron of officers for you?*

Yet another question Tommy couldn't quite answer. He didn't think George would accept 'It's complicated' as a response. Someone had once told him the best lies were based in truth (Technoblade. Technoblade had told him that) so Tommy went with another half-lie for an answer, yet another deception.

"I--I left home a while back." Truth, sort of. *Home* was a stretch. A while back was technically perfectly truthful if a 'while' was right before he started working for them.

"They knew I left and everything." Another truth, or something close to it. They had been there when he had run out, hadn't they?

"I figured it was fine between us." A lie this time. Tommy had known they would be furious, he just hadn't cared.

"I didn't think they'd care enough to come find me." He admitted, and that was the truest one of all.

A small, wounded noise came from somewhere behind him. Wilbur. Tommy fought to ignore the simmering rage that little sound of concern summoned. They didn't have any right to act like that hurt their *feelings* or some shit, not when they had betrayed him so fundamentally. The *nerve* of them. The *audacity*, to invade his new base and murder their guards and threaten his new boss when they were the ones who had set his escape into motion. When it was their fault.

For a second, Tommy considered turning around and stabbing him, just for kicks. He still had another dagger tucked into his boot. He could snatch it and dash down the stairs, and plunge it into Wilbur's neck before he could dodge. To twist the blade. To watch as blood gurgled up through the wound. Ranboo *was* always saying that he had a lot of bottled up anger he needed to release. It would be *therapeutic*.

But he didn't do that, as tempting as it was. He just kept pleading with George. "Give me a week. Please. Just let them stay for a few days to see that I'm alright and then I promise they'll be out of your hands."

They'll be out of your hands. Tommy hoped that the gang noticed that. Not *we*. *They*.

George bit the inside of his cheek, frowning. He was certainly making a show of deliberating, of acting like he was in charge of the decision, but his clever brown eyes met Tommy's and the uncertainty there spoke volumes. George had seen what the gang was capable of. He wasn't an idiot. He knew that he couldn't truly say no while keeping his head on his shoulders. This whole display of deciding was just him grasping onto the tenuous threads of power he still had, trying to regain his control over his own base.

"Very well. They may take up residence in the guest rooms." George told him after a long pause, and Tommy let out a breath of relief. "But the rest of my people will know what they have done here. They shouldn't expect any niceties from them. Any threats will be met with force, and this time Sapnap and Karl will be there to handle things. And if I see any sign that they might hurt you..."

"They won't." Tommy promised, and then he hesitated before adding on an, "I think."

Another distressed noise.

George just nodded. "Okay Theseus. You may show them to the base. Their rooms will be in the maintenance wing, please show them where they'll be staying for the night."

A pause. "Should I invite them to dinner, sir?"

George's eyes met Tommy's, and there was a sort of cold approval in them.

"Oh, yes, of course." George replied with a wicked, icy grin, mirroring Tommy's own.

Another reason Tommy liked the man so much. He was formal, and he was snobby, but he was also vicious. Petty to the extreme. Once someone wronged him, he held a grudge. They shared that. George knew that inviting the gang to dinner, seeing Tommy there, would hurt. And so he did it.

"I think it'll be a wonderful way to show them how things really are."

Tommy stalked towards the three of them with a dark glare, hoping for all the world he embodied the vicious poison festering in his gut. Hoping that he scared them, even just a little bit.

"Family, huh?" Technoblade commented with a rare half-grin as he approached, clearly referencing Tommy's early declaration to George. He reached out a hand towards Tommy's shoulder. Wilbur elbowed him lightly in the chest. Philza leveled them with an exasperated glare, but he too was grinning like he was in on some sort of inside joke.

Tommy, for one, didn't see what was so funny.

"Go fuck yourself." Tommy snapped in a hushed whisper, swatting Techno's hand away and storming past them, "What the hell else was I supposed to tell G--404?"

All three of the footsteps that had been trailing him paused.

"You--so then--" Wilbur's voice sounded shocked to the core. Tommy glanced over his shoulder to see all three of them staring at him with a mixture of distress and confusion.

"Holy shit, did you guys think I was *serious*?" Tommy snickered, not even trying to keep the bitterness from his tone, "*Family*. As if."

Tommy let them sit with that for a moment before he nodded sharply towards the door. "Follow me, I'll give you the tour around the base and then you guys can fuck off to your rooms for the night."

Wilbur recoiled at the harshness of the words. Techno was frowning slightly harder than usual. Phil was blinking rapidly as if he was seeing Tommy for the first time. Tommy was surprised to find he didn't quite care. If anything, seeing them so off-guard brought a little sliver of vindication rocketing through his veins.

"You coming or what?" He snapped as he reached the door, and the three of them began following him again, albeit a little more hesitantly.

He couldn't help but savor the moment. He was being an asshole and he knew it, but it was honestly satisfying to see them so shaken. He'd been too docile when he was with them before. They hadn't seen him as the threat he was.

That was going to change.

Tommy gestured to a hallway on his right. "This is the weapons and planning wing, for obvious reasons you're not permitted to go into any of these rooms."

Technoblade huffed. "I'll go where I like."

"No." Tommy said simply, "No you won't. Not if you want to stay here. You'll follow my rules, for once."

Techno grumbled, low and threatening, and opened his mouth to respond. Tommy's fingers tightened around his staff. Philza settled a hand on Technoblade's bicep and the man cut off whatever it was he had been about to say. Tommy's grip relaxed.

The rest of the walk went by in complete silence.

Tommy stopped at a gray door, opening it to a small room with a single twin-sized bed, a small lamp, and a bedside table.

"Here we are." He muttered, gesturing at the furniture, "This is--"

"What is this?" Techno interrupted, sounding bored, "We don't need to see the servant's quarters, Theseus. A general tour will do."

Philza's expression instantly morphed into one of both disappointment and alarm. His eyes were wide, uncertain, and he kept glancing at Tommy like he was worried the kid was going to stab him, and that was how Tommy knew the man had realized what a majorly stupid thing Techno had just said. Phil was already trying to warn him of the error, his exasperation evident. "Oh my Prime, Technobla--"

"These aren't the servant's quarters." Tommy gritted out through clenched teeth, "This is my room."

If Techno had looked closer he would have noticed the touch of Tommy in the room--the tiny flower pot where he had grown a single poppy, the knife marks etched into the wall, the leather boots sitting in one corner--but he wasn't, and neither, it seemed, was Wilbur.

The man reared back in utter shock. "Excuse me?"

"This?" Technoblade snapped, lip curled in disgust, "This is what they have given you?"

Philza was just staring at the two of them like he was considering knocking their heads against each other. Like he hadn't thought it was possible for them to be so incredibly idiotic. Tommy was inclined to agree. Sure, his living quarters weren't exactly the peak of luxury, but they were *his*. He couldn't help but feel a pang of hurt at the insults.

He covered it up with a scowl. "Okay, now you're just being a jerk."

"I do not understand." Techno growled.

Tommy was so shocked by the words that he let out a choked laugh. "What? What could possibly be so hard to understand about this?"

Tommy had almost thought it a joke, his statement, but when he looked at Techno he could see the man glancing around the room with genuine, complete confusion. Like he actually had no clue why Tommy might prefer his situation with the Feral boys over his life with them.

"Why--why would you stay here?" Techno asked, sounding lost, "It doesn't...make sense. We could give you so much more than this. We already had."

Tommy rolled his eyes. "As much as you guys clearly think I should be babied, I don't *need* a massive, lavish room with your carpets and chairs and fireplaces."

"But you should have one nonetheless." Technoblade insisted, his voice strangely urgent, "*With us you would have had one*. You shouldn't stay with them. They're not treating you like they sh--"

No. No, no. He wasn't letting them believe that he'd had it better when he was with them. Life with the Feral boys might not have been as gaudy as it was with the Antarctic gang, but that didn't mean it was worse. He needed them to understand that.

“What are you *talking* about? The Feral gang are nice. I *like* it here.” Tommy insisted, “I have everything I could possibly need. They treat me well, they’re good people.”

“The lot of them should be begging at your feet, Theseus. They aren’t treating you well *enough*. Any valued member of our organization would be given more care--” His eyes took in Tommy’s gaunt face, his too-thin frame, “And you’re getting too *skinny* again. Haven’t you been eating?”

“That’s not their fault.” Tommy argued, getting more frustrated by the second, “I’m busy.”

Techno’s eyes went hard. “They should be feeding you, child. They shouldn’t have put you in this tiny, grey hole for a room and just *left* you to your--”

“So what?” His voice pitched upward as he spoke, crescendoing into something bordering a yell, “I should want--I should strive for your fucking gilded *cage*--”

Tommy cut himself off as he realized that he was getting too loud. George, Karl, Sapnap...he had been careful not to tell them anything about his life before he was under their care. He didn’t want to reveal his issues to them now of all times. All that would do was bring more questions towards him, towards the gang’s presence. So he pressed his lips together, marched past them and kicked at the wooden door to his room, clenching his fists, fighting to keep the barely simmering rage pressed down until they had some semblance of privacy. So he didn’t do something he would regret.

The door clicked shut. Tommy whirled on them.

“Okay, cut the bullshit.” he hissed, head whipping between the three of them, “Why are you really here?”

They stared at him. Their expressions were confused--Wilbur with his little eyebrow furrow, Phil cocking his head as always, Techno just staring blankly at him, just pure, genuine confusion. Wilbur gave an awkward cough. “I’m sorry, what?”

Tommy just glared at the three of them. “Prime, have you three gone dense in the two months I’ve been gone? *What are you doing here?*”

Wilbur’s brows twisted even further into an expression of puzzlement. “What do you mean, what are we doing here, I would think it would be pretty clear--”

As if Tommy was going to fall for this--this faux confusion. This fucking act. As if he was that dumb. He was so sick of them underestimating him. He was so sick of the lies. “Well it’s not or I wouldn’t be asking, would I? You know this is the entire reason I left, you guys are always so *fucking* pretentious, always looking down on me--”

Wilbur’s eyes went volatile. Dangerous. If looks could kill, Tommy would be a pile of ash on the floor. “I can’t believe we’ve spent weeks trying to find you and this is the thanks we get, you ungrateful little--”

“Wilbur!” Phil snapped, ever the mediator. Wilbur went silent like a scolded child. Phil turned his gentle gaze on Tommy. “Mate, we’re here to take you back home. We’re here to rescue you.”

Tommy let out a bark of shocked laughter. “Rescue me? Do I look like I need to be fucking rescued--”

And then he realized. Why the gang had stormed into the throne room like a hurricane. Why they had slaughtered the guards and threatened George. Why they were currently staring at him like he was as fragile as glass.

Tommy choked on his next breath. “Oh my Prime. Oh. My. *Prime*. You guys actually--you guys actually thought I had been taken hostage or something?”

“You went missing without a trace. Without telling us where you were going.” Wilbur grunted at him, taking a dangerous step closer, voice quickly gaining volume, “We thought you were dead. You’ve been gone for two *months*.”

“Gee, I wonder why.” Tommy couldn’t help but mutter under his breath.

Wilbur threw his hands up in the air. “Look, I said some things before you left, but that’s no reason for you to throw some sort of--what, some sort of *temper tantrum* because your feelings were hurt? What, do you want us to say *sorry*?”

“Well if I did you’d be off to a pretty shit start.” Tommy told him dryly. Sarcasm made the words hurt less. Ranboo called it an ‘unhealthy coping mechanism’. Tommy didn’t really give a fuck.

Wilbur was not amused. “What is this, Tommy? You run away from us because of one fight? *Grow up*.”

“No, no, you don’t get to do that. You don’t get to make it seem like I’m the insane one here.” Tommy snarled, “Worthless, you called me. Pathetic child. Completely useless. That was what you said. You don’t get to come in here and act like--like you want me back at your base, on your guys’ team. You don’t get to pretend you care.”

“A mistake.” Wilbur conceded, but his eyes were still hard, his voice still rough. Like even admitting that much wrongdoing physically pained him.

Like Tommy was overreacting.

The look he sent Wilbur was equal parts wounded and withering. He couldn’t decide whether he wanted to cry or scream. “A *mistake*? Amounting my life’s work to meaningless, telling me my job meant nothing to you, that was--that was just a *mistake* to you?”

Phil heard the frantic note in Tommy’s voice, or maybe he noticed the way Tommy’s fists were clenching, because finally, *finally*, he intervened.

Tommy felt a jolt of relief. Phil was the voice of reason. Phil would sort things out. Phil would help them see, surely.

But when Philza finally spoke, it wasn’t a scolding directed at Wilbur. No, the words were turned at Tommy. “Mate, you have to realize it was a heated moment. You can’t fault him for words said in anger--”

Tommy felt his heart physically drop from his chest and shatter on the floor. He was taking--he was siding with Wilbur? Wilbur, who had betrayed him. Wilbur, who had stabbed the knife into his back and twisted. And Phil, reasonable, level-headed Phil was--what, defending him? Saying that it wasn’t his fault?

Finally, Tommy snapped.

“But that wasn’t the fucking problem! It was just the straw that broke the camel’s back. You guys--you locked me up for *months*, away from my work, away from my purpose, and I didn’t even realize it was happening because I *liked* you. You were so fucking *nice* that I just--I just let you fool me and then when I remembered and all I wanted to do was prove myself to you--you wouldn’t even let me do that. You made me worthless. You made me *nothing*. And then you threw it back in my face.” Tommy gasped. His entire body was shaking, though with anger or grief he wasn’t quite sure. “So--so don’t you dare, come in here spewing your bullshit about *caring* about me. Come up with a better excuse.”

The room fell into stunned silence. Phil looked like he might cry.

Tommy didn’t dare look at Wilbur. He took a haggard breath, chest heaving. His eyes were burning again, but he refused to give them the satisfaction of letting the tears fall. His nails dug into the palms of his hand.

In the midst of the quiet, the door to Tommy's room swung open.

"Hey Theseus, I heard you--" Karl's head of brown hair poked into the room and immediately his gaze caught on the three figures looming over him, flickering to Tommy's clenched hands and then up to his face, which Tommy was sure was bright red from the effort of not crying. He immediately went stiff.

"Am I--am I interrupting something here? I can..." He gestured vaguely toward the door.

Wilbur sent him a carefully impassive look. "Yes, actually, we we--"

"No." Tommy interrupted sharply, sending Wilbur a cold glare before turning back to Karl with a softer, kinder expression, "No, Karl, you're not interrupting anything. I was actually just about to show our guests where they would be staying."

His voice harbored no room for debate. Wilbur's lips parted, clearly about to argue, but Tommy was already striding past, taking care not to meet any of their eyes as he swept past them into the hall.

"Well?" He snapped, when none of them followed, "Are you guys coming or what? You want to stay on the streets? By all means, go right ahead."

Reluctantly, the gang followed. Tommy refused to speak another word to them as he led them to their rooms. He was too afraid he would snap again.

He dropped off Technoblade first.

George had assigned them the worst possible guest quarters in the entire base, a tiny, cell-like space with gray walls and a cot for a bed and a single candlestick as light, and Tommy had been more than happy to oblige the orders after Techno's whole speech about how horrible his room was. He couldn't help the little smug grin that flashed across his face as Techno stared at the room in disgust, as his lip curled.

"Enjoy!" Tommy chirped with great satisfaction, "If you see any mold I probably wouldn't touch it. Karl thinks the spores are poisonous."

Out of the corner of his eye Phil stifled a laugh.

Phil was the next to go. His lip didn't twist at the sight of his lackluster lodgings, not like Techno's had. The man just set down his bags and gave Tommy a soft grin. "I'll see you at dinner, Toms."

That--that was new. The nickname. *Toms*.

It felt strangely intimate. Soft. Despite himself, something warm surged in Tommy's chest.

"I'm excited for you to show us around a little more." Phil's eyes were gentle.

Tommy turned away. He didn't want their kindness.

Wilbur was the last to be left in his room. He didn't even glance at his accommodations; he just stared at Tommy imploringly. "I really am sor--"

Tommy slammed the door in his face. He turned down the hallway. He pretended he didn't hear Karl calling his name as he passed the kitchen. He walked back to his room. He closed the door deliberately, softly behind him.

And then, for the first time in months, Tommy curled up into a ball on his bed and cried.

It was the communicator attached to Tommy's belt that woke him up. It was a small, scrappy device, nothing at all like the tech pad that Techno had given him, but it was functional, and it was loud. It sort of had to be-- it was his emergency line to his only two trustworthy contacts on the outside.

And it was buzzing furiously. Tommy blinked away the leftover tears from his eyelashes and turned the device on. What were they messaging him about now?

Bee: sensors triggered

Tommy couldn't help but snort out a laugh at that. Really? Now, Tubbo had noticed the movement sensors had been tripped? *Now?*

Bird: A little late bee boy

Bird: They found me

It was only half a second after he sent the message that three little dots popped up on the bottom of the screen, signaling they were writing back. The next responses came in a frantic flurry of panicked text:

Boo: What?

Boo: We can come retrieve you in thirty.

Bee: the swarm has already left

Bee: don't need to run birdy

Bee: my bees will enjoy their blood

Well. That was...mildly concerning. Tommy had guessed that Tubbo still had a few hijacked drones under his control, but he must have been hacking more in his spare time because the boy was making it sound a lot more like an army of them at his disposal.

And he was sending them to the Feral boys base. For Tommy. Not to mention Ranboo volunteering to help him through the escape route they'd planned out.

He couldn't help but feel a little warm at that.

Boo: Tubbo, we shouldn't test their skills.

Boo: We can't risk it.

Boo: I'll be there, T. I can sneak you out.

And as much as Tommy knew it would be immensely satisfying to watch Tubbo's drones take out the entirety of the Antarctic gang, Ranboo was right. It'd be far too dangerous, way too much of a risk: after watching them take out two dozen of George's guards without breaking a sweat, it was hard to believe drones would phase them, even if they were a massive swarm.

Also, Tommy knew how Tubbo was. The kid was strangely attached to the little AI machines. He'd be absolutely devastated if they were cut into pieces. He couldn't let him sacrifice them for nothing.

Bird: No

Bee: yse dont need run

Bee: SWArM

Bird: No I have it under control for now

Bird: I dont want to get you guys involved

Boo: We can't just leave you there, T.

It was a touching sentiment, really, but Tommy couldn't help but think having them in the Feral gang's base would only make things worse. They were another liability, another thing Tommy would have to protect. He didn't want them in the crossfire. He didn't want the Antarctic gang to know about them. Convincing them it was alright to leave him there wouldn't be easy, but it needed to be done.

Bird: They haven't hurt me. I've come to an arrangement with George.

Bee: nO swarm??/??

Bird: not today dude

Boo: What if they do, T? What if they hurt you? Or kidnap you again?

The whole reassurance plan was clearly not going as well as he hoped. It was time for Plan B: lie through his teeth.

Bird: boo I promise if they get worse Ill tell you and then we can figure something out. Im fine really

He was not fine. He was not fine at all. His entire life was splitting at the seams and Tommy was just barely holding together all the pieces, but Ranboo didn't need that on his mind. He had bigger problems, him and Tubbo both. They didn't need to distract themselves looking after him.

Boo: Are you sure?

Bird: Lets just play it by ear for now ok

Bee: fine

Boo: Sounds good. Keep us updated.

Bird: Will do but todays meeting will have to be delayed

Bird: Cant leave right now with them here

Bird: Ill head over in a few days once theyve gotten off my back

Boo: If you say so. Just remember we're here to help.

Tommy's fingers paused over the communicator's keys. *They were there to help.* Right. Tubbo and Ranboo were his friends now, they wanted to help him, he knew that, of course he knew that. So why was he still so hesitant to believe it was true?

Bird: Yeah, Boo, of course I

No. No, that wasn't right. Tommy deleted the message.

Bird: I just don't think you understand wh

That just sounded fucking condescending. Tommy stabbed furiously at the backspace button.

A bell rang somewhere in the distance and Tommy let out the breath of air he had been holding in his chest.

Bird: Well have to talk about this later. Dinner.

Saved by the bell. What a relief. What could possibly go wrong at dinner?

A lot, as it turned out.

Dinner with the Feral boys was always a jubilant affair. Despite how much of a stickler George was about formality and respect, he set aside all of his rules each night for the meal.

It was their tradition--for the rest of the day everyone could do whatever they wished, could focus solely on their assignments, but dinner was a requirement. At precisely 1900 every night, every single member of the gang would file into the dining hall and spend an hour with their brothers in arms, eating and drinking and laughing. As the head thief, Tommy sat with the other leaders of the gang at the head table, which sat at the end of the room on a raised platform, right between Karl (the record's keeper) and Sapnap (head of pyrotechnics, obviously).

Once Tommy had asked George why he insisted on the event every night and the man had simply mentioned something about how it was good for the gang's morale. How it kept them close. That was the day Tommy realized George wasn't an idiot. He knew how to gain his soldier's loyalty. Nobody wanted to betray their friends.

That night in particular, while Tommy was seated at the high table, the gang was seated with the common foot soldiers, at a table just close enough that they could hear snippets of Tommy's conversations. A snub from George he assumed, and one that Tommy was thoroughly enjoying.

"So those guys are your family, Theseus?" Sapnap asked him around a mouth full of chicken, "The big pink-haired guy, and the lanky one, and the bird?"

Tommy snorted. "Family is a bit generous. We're not even a team, not anymore."

Karl cackled. He knew that Wilbur had heard it when he saw the man's face fall. He'd be lying if he said it didn't make him a little gleeful.

For the entire night, Tommy cackled and teased and playfully snapped at Karl and Sapnap. For the entire night, Wilbur and Philza and Technoblade could do nothing but watch.

Tommy spent the entirety of the next day doing everything in his power to avoid the gang.

It was his off day, basically his only day-long break for his entire week--he certainly wasn't going to waste his precious free time talking to them. If anything that would just make him more tired. If Tommy had his way of things, he'd go the entire week without saying another word to any of them.

Unfortunately, it was a rather intricate dance, avoiding them.

He couldn't stay in his room, that much was clear. It was too obvious of a spot for him to hide in, especially since the day before he had made the mistake of showing the gang exactly where his quarters were located. Even if he tried to sleep the day away or hole up and wait them out, he was sure they would come by and try to speak with him. Leaving wasn't an option either, not with the relationship between them and the Feral gang still so tumultuous. Honestly, Tommy was a little afraid they would slaughter the gang if he disappeared again without telling them, even if it was just for a few hours. He didn't want to risk it. At least if he stayed he could keep an eye on them.

Armory and kitchen were a no as well; he was certain either Sapnap or Karl would be occupying them, and he didn't think he could talk to them without breaking down or snapping.

Unfortunately, that left his options sort of limited.

He really only had one left for how to spend his time while keeping out of sight: tucked back in one of the spare storage rooms of the Feral boys, Tommy had cultivated a small, shabby garden with a few sets of UV lights, chipped flowerpots, and scavenged seeds. It wasn't especially impressive or flourishing, but it was a way to pass his down time. It grew extra herbs and spices for the Feral gang. It was calming. It took his mind off of everything else.

And, if he was being honest, it reminded him of Phil.

So Tommy spent the entire day tending to the little plants, ignoring Ranboo's concerned messages, and praying to Prime that none of the Feral boys would be foolish enough to tell any of the gang that his garden existed and where it was. For once, it seemed that Prime was on his side. The entire afternoon went undisturbed.

Eventually though, his luck had to run out. The dinner bell rang. It sounded like a harbinger of doom. Dinner was mandatory. It was one of George's most important rules, and Tommy was already on thin ice. Tommy reluctantly abandoned his plants. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't just hide in his storage room all night. He peeked his head out of the door, glancing nervously in each direction. The hallway was empty. The coast was clear.

Tommy relaxed almost imperceptibly. He crept out of the room, shutting the door with a soft click and padding silently down the hall. He turned down another hallway, and another, overly cautious all the while, and he was only a few seconds away from the dining hall when he heard the floor creak from behind him--

"You're avoiding us." A voice said at his back, and Tommy had an *oh fuck* moment where he realized he hadn't checked his six in far too long. It was too late now--he glanced over his shoulder to see Wilbur in all of his brooding glory, glasses perched condescendingly on the edge of his nose as he peered down at Tommy. His hands were shoved into the pockets of his trenchcoat, his eyes glinting dangerously as he leaned casually against the wall. A lit cigarette poked out of his mouth.

"No." Tommy replied instantly as both pure panic and self preservation instincts kicked in, "I'm not."

"You can't keep hiding, you know. What are you going to do once you come back?" Wilbur didn't even acknowledge that he had spoken. That he had lied. He sounded almost bored. "Eventually you're going to have to talk to us. You haven't told us what exactly we're still doing here, what your problem is. You're not just going to be able to keep running away, especially not after--"

And Tommy saw red. He was done playing around, done letting them think they had any say in what was happening to him. It was time to show some teeth.

"There is no after!" He snarled suddenly, "Stop acting like I'm going to come back with you. Stop acting like it's inevitable. You lot are all so *fucking* sure that I'm going back down there, back down to that *hell* miles beneath the surface, well, *news flash*, I'm not! There is no *after*. There is no anything. The only reason I even convinced George to let you guys stick around was so that you could see I was alright. So you wouldn't have to worry or feel like you need to watch me or whatever, you understand?"

Wilbur blinked, showing the first hint of emotion that he had for the entire conversation--shock. His lips parted to reply, but Tommy wasn't done. He needed to make sure this sunk in. "I only let you stay so that way you wouldn't keep trying to manage me, and at the end of the week, by the stars, you *will* be gone and I will never see you fuckers again, or so help me Prime, I will kill all of you in your sleep."

And *that*-- that caught Wilbur's attention. He stood up straighter, snuffing out his cigarette on the wall and stalking closer to Tommy in slow, deliberate steps.

"Is that a threat?" He asked, lips twisting into a grin, "You really think that you could take down all three of us? I mean even me you'd have trouble fighting, but Philza?"

He laughed sharply. Tommy flinched. "*Technoblade*? You couldn't. You wouldn't even have the guts to try. Tell me I'm wrong."

The worst part was, he couldn't. As much as he hated them, he also sort of liked them, and he was completely uncertain whether, if it came down to it, he'd actually be able to actually put a knife through their throat. He couldn't show weakness now, though. Wilbur was a bloodhound--he'd sense the blood in the water and go for the kill. He had to remain impassive. He couldn't let him think he had the upper hand. "I don't care. It doesn't matter. Even if I can't, there are other ways to end this."

"Really?" Wilbur grinned lazily, but gone was the relaxed demeanor Tommy had seen only seconds earlier. Now, everything about him was intense. Barbed. "Enlighten me, Toms."

"I'll disappear."

Wilbur rolled his eyes, clearly disappointed. "You've already tried that once. We found you before, and we'll do it again."

Tommy just shook his head. "Not like last time. Not leaving you and going back to my other life. I'll vanish. I'll rescind my name as Theseus, I'll disappear into the shadows so that there's not even a trace of me left. I'll go so deep into the tunnels of the Underground that even you can't find me."

Wilbur's smile twitched.

"You underestimate me, Wilbur. You always have. I know people, I have connections. None of them would hesitate to have me under their command, except this time I'll do it as a nameless, faceless ghost."

A flicker of something like uncertainty flashed through Wilbur's eyes.

"I want to be Theseus. I really do. But I have no problem giving up the name if it means leaving you behind. If it means having my own freedom."

The smile was gone now.

Wilbur blinked. Tommy had caught him off guard again. "You'd really do all that? Just to...to get away from us?"

Tommy got the feeling that Wilbur had thought it was all some sort of game until that moment. That he couldn't actually have been considering leaving them for good. That it was all some sort of bluff. It wasn't. Tommy looked away. "You're...you're not good for me. You guys don't see me on even footing, and I need--I need to be respected. I need to be an equal. Most of all, I need my work. You guys don't get that--it's not good."

Wilbur shook his head. "We're the best thing for you, Tommy. We could protect you. We really do care about you."

Tommy went as tense as a live wire, as hostile as a feral cat. "*Don't lie to me*. Nobody cares about me. I'm on my own, just like always, and I don't know what you guys want but you should just give up and stop lying to try and get it."

Wilbur stared at him then. Like he was a puzzle he couldn't quite figure out. Tommy glared right back.

"We'll kill them. The Feral gang." Wilbur said when he broke the silence, "The minute you disappear, it will be their blood on your hands. Do you want that?"

"I'm not like you, Will. I don't want their deaths. I wouldn't enjoy it." Tommy told him, his voice resigned. He was tired. "But I've lost people before. More than you could know. I've been alone for a decade. You'd be foolish to think I couldn't go back to that again."

Silence. Tommy thought he saw remorse flicker in Wilbur's eyes for a moment, but it was gone before he could be certain.

"Fine then, Tommy." the man said finally, "How about a little wager, then, if you're so confident."

Tommy raised an eyebrow. "I'm listening."

"One week. That's what you negotiated with 404, right? At the end of the week, if you really don't want to come back to the Depths with us, we'll leave. You won't ever have to see us again. You can stay here and live in obscurity with these Feral boys for however long you wish. But if you decide you'd rather work for the Antarctic gang--for real this time--you come back with us."

It couldn't be that simple. It was never that simple. Tommy eyed him suspiciously, "What's the catch?"

For the first time in months Tommy saw one of Wilbur's genuine, thousand watt smiles flash across his face. "You've always been so clever, Tommy."

Tommy couldn't help but glow at the praise, even despite everything.

"No more avoiding us. No more trying to hide."

That--that was it? That didn't even sound hard. Surely it couldn't be that difficult to spend a single week in their company. He wasn't some child that could be manipulated by whatever lies they told him. This was still just about security to them--managing the threat to their identities, controlling the city's best thief. He wouldn't fall for it. He'd stick it out until the end of the week and then he'd be free. It would be easy.

"And you'll leave at the end of the week? As long as I don't want to go back with you?" There was palpable hope in his voice when he asked it.

Wilbur just nodded, his eyes glittering with the promise of a challenge. The thrill of the chase. "On my life, Tommy. You won't ever have to see us again."

And...well...

That was just too good of a deal to resist.

Tommy was tending to his plants the next morning, still trying desperately to avoid Wilbur despite their deal, when he heard the door to the storage room swing open and jumped about a foot into the air. Instantly he was on the defensive, gripping the trowel in his hand like he was considering using it to stab someone's jugular, mind scrambling for excuses. It wasn't technically avoiding them, right? He was just gardening. How was it his fault they didn't know where his gardens were?

He wasn't exactly sure Wilbur would see it that way, though.

"Wilbur, I swear I wasn't trying to--" He tried to placate, before he finally glanced towards the door and caught sight of who exactly had interrupted his gardening time.

The tension fled from his muscles. His shoulders dropped. "Oh. It's you."

Philza himself, standing there in the doorway holding his wings in one arm and a handful of cloth in the other. He blinked at Tommy, clearly surprised to see him.

“Oh, hey there mate. What are you doing--” His eyes locked on something over Tommy’s shoulder and his mouth split into a too-wide grin, “Is that a garden?”

Oh fuck. Damnit. He was an idiot.

“The Feral boys’ cooking was bland. Very, very bland, they just needed a little spice, honestly I’m just doing them a favor--*stop looking at me like that.*” Tommy hissed.

Phil was giving him a knowing smile. “Sure, Toms. Whatever you say.”

He set his wings on the ground a few feet away from Tommy’s garden, settling onto the floor, next to them. He pulled out one of the pieces of cloth and began rubbing it against the metal.

Tommy glared at him. “What are you doing?”

“I’m cleaning my wings.” Phil told him, not tearing his gaze from his work.

“No, Phil.” Tommy snapped, more irritably this time, “Why are you doing it in *here*?”

“I need somewhere to do it. That’s why I was looking through the storage rooms, I’d rather it be somewhere a little more private.” Phil shrugged, “This seems like as good a spot as any.”

“But--but I’m in here.” Tommy said pointlessly. Desperately. Why wouldn’t he just leave? What else could Tommy possibly do to scare him off?

“I know.” Phil replied, “Would you like to help?”

Tommy recoiled in shock, shaking his head frantically. What was wrong with him? “No.”

“Okay. That’s alright.” Phil said simply, and that was that. Phil went back to his work, and Tommy went back to his.

Tommy tried to ignore him. He really did. He swore he would just go back to his gardening and not speak to him for the rest of the afternoon. And then, out of the corner of his eye, Tommy caught sight of the beautiful, intricate machinery of the wings up close, and he couldn’t help but turn his head a little more in their direction. He couldn’t help but inch closer.

Phil tried and failed to hide his smile. “They’re still machines you know, and the surface is dirty. I have to wipe them down, polish them, make sure the joints are greased. It’s a very delicate procedure to keep them operational. Especially if you want to fly in them.”

Tommy leaned just a little bit closer, staring at them. “You can actually--you can actually fly? With the wings?”

“I’d forgotten you hadn’t seen me use them like that yet.” Phil chuckled, wiping the cloth over the edges of the biggest feathers, “They’re not just for decoration, mate. I can fly in them. Sometimes I take a loop around the Depths just for fun.”

Tommy was sure that if Phil had glanced over at him then he would have seen stars in his eyes. “Whoa. They’re not too heavy?”

“They’re made of a special type of ultralight titanium. They’re not that hard to learn to use, either. Techno refuses to try them out, but Wilbur’s used them a few times. I could teach you, if you wanted.” Tommy’s eyes shot to Phil, who was being very carefully nonchalant. Trying to make it seem like it wasn’t a big deal, even if they both knew it was.

For a minute bright, blooming excitement grew in his chest at the thought of it.

And then he remembered a slight complication. "I couldn't. I--I don't like heights."

Phil muffled a laugh, his eyes twinkling. "You don't like heights? Mate, you climbed the--"

He cut off abruptly and Tommy knew the realization of why he no longer enjoyed heights had hit him. "Ah. I see."

Tommy stared at his feet. The storage room fell into an awkward silence again.

"That's alright, you know." Phil said, impossibly gentle, a second later, "We wouldn't have to go high. We could start slow."

For a moment Tommy could see it, in his mind, the joy of it. Of Phil standing by his side, straightening the feathers. Of the gentle weight of the silver metal on his back. Of the wind rushing through his hair, cackling as he flew around the city lights, sparkling like tiny little stars.

His lips parted. "I--"

The realization that hit him then was like a punch to the chest, sending him reeling back gasping for air, startling and concerning and horrible all at once--he wanted to say yes. He wanted Phil to go back to teaching him and helping him and caring about him. He wanted Phil to teach him how to fly. It was a dream. A horrible, perfect dream made all the worse because knew he could have it if he just let it happen. He could scoot closer to Phil and let the man teach him about cleaning the wings, and make amends with Wilbur and Techno.

But as much as Tommy wanted it, that rose-tinted reverie, he had dreams too.

For a while, he'd thought they could coexist.

It was honestly a kindness that Wilbur had proven him wrong before he got any more attached.

He pushed himself off the ground, refusing to meet Phil's too-knowing eyes. "I better go. I have a retrieval mission in an hour. I--I'll see you later Philza."

Someone was following him.

He hadn't been sure at first. They were sly, his tail. Careful.

He was sprinting through the streets, on his way to his retrieval mission, when he felt it: a warning bell in the recesses of his mind, all the hairs standing up on the back of his neck. At first he'd brushed it off, summing it up to a bout of paranoia or leftover nerves from the gang showing up out of the blue. They had, admittedly, thrown him off his game: he was jumpier than usual, still on edge. That was all. He was imagining things.

Or so he assumed, until he realized that his footsteps had an echo. That the sound of them still echoed through the air a millisecond too long after every time he paused.

They were good. Mimicking his footsteps almost perfectly, lingering just out of his sight. He could probably catch a glimpse of them if he whipped his head over his shoulder fast enough and looked in just the right spot, but Tommy didn't think that would be a good way to play things.

He only had one advantage: they didn't know that he knew they were following him. They thought him unaware, oblivious. Looking for them outright would only give that away.

No, as always, Tommy needed to play the long game. He forced his expression into one of perfect neutrality. His footsteps kept their even pace along the cobblestones. No hesitation, not a single falter in his gait. Hopefully, his follower would remain completely unaware that he had been noticed, all while Tommy figured out a way to catch them off guard and--

Out of the corner of his eye Tommy spotted a narrow gap between two buildings, just wide enough that if he stretched his arms out he could reach each side.

Yes. That was exactly what he needed. Pivoting on one heel, Tommy sprinted into the slim, crooked street.

They wouldn't be able to keep watching him, not from a safe distance. The alleyway was obscured from all outward angles, all good watchpoints. The only way they could keep their eye on him would be to get a little bit closer, to stop keeping their distance and trail right behind him.

To follow him directly down the street. Into his trap. As soon as he was out of sight of the main street, Tommy cut off to the side, nestling himself in the shadows. Waiting. Sure enough, not a moment later, a dark, hulking figure barreled around the corner.

Tommy struck.

His staff flashed through the air like lightning, swooping out the figure's feet from under them--and giving them a nasty shock just for good measure. In the same instant as the spy landed on the ground, Tommy used his other hand to snatch the dagger out of his boot and pin the now-downed figure to the dirt, slicing through their cloak right above their shoulder, millimeters from their neck, and embedding the tip deep in the ground.

If the electrocution hadn't stopped them, that would. They couldn't go anywhere without tearing their cloak entirely in two, and even if they did, Tommy would still be waiting for them with the staff in hand.

Now, the harder part: figuring out why he was being followed. Tommy pressed one foot down on the person's chest. They were probably still trying to catch their breath from getting knocked flat onto their back--pressing down on their chest as they tried to recover would give him a little extra time to interrogate them and, as an added bonus, would probably be more than a little uncomfortable.

Sure enough, the person huffed as the pressure settled on them, and Tommy--

Tommy paused.

Because that huff, that little exhale of air, sounded very awfully familiar. Tommy hadn't been paying much attention to the details of the stranger before, but now it was all he could seem to focus on: the broad chest, the laced boots, the tiniest tuft of pink hair peeking out from under the cloak's hood.

Suddenly, the whole being trailed thing seemed to make a lot more sense.

With a swoop of his staff, the hood fell back.

Glowing red eyes stared back at him.

Of course. He should have known. Tommy scowled.

"Theseus." Technoblade greeted, looking disgruntled. "Is this how you treat all of your family? No wonder you're alone."

It was clearly an attempt at a jest, an attempt to lighten the mood and perhaps distract from the fact that Tommy had just caught him following behind while he was working. It was just a joke. The words hit him straight in the heart. Tommy couldn't help but stumble back half a step, as if the jab was a physical thing, a dagger that had just plunged into his chest.

It was just a joke, but it *wasn't*. It was close, far too close, to the truth of things. Flashes of his parents, of Dream, of raised voices and red handprints and listening to hushed arguments from the shadows of the staircase echoed through his skull. *No wonder you're alone.*

Tommy went stiff.

He was right, as usual. Tommy was alone. He needed to remember that.

The staff swung just a little bit closer to Techno's neck. The man blinked. For once, Tommy had caught him off guard--he clearly hadn't been expecting that.

Maybe he'd thought Tommy would let his guard down after he realized who it was that had been tailing him. He was wrong.

"Tommy?" Techno said, a little bit more uncertainly. Not quite afraid; Technoblade was never afraid. No, this was more unsettled. Like he was beginning to realize that Tommy wouldn't be as opposed to stabbing him as he had previously thought.

Good.

"You have ten seconds to tell me why you were following me and then I'm going to press this staff to your neck until your heart gives out." Tommy hissed, "And we're not *family*. I don't have a family."

At that, Techno growled. Honest to Prime, *growled*.

"Careful," He warned, voice low, like he was the one who had Tommy lying prone on the ground and not the other way around. Like he was the dangerous one there. Just in case, or maybe just because he was feeling particularly vindictive that day, Tommy tapped his staff against Techno's chest. He would be lying if he said it wasn't just a little bit gratifying to see Technoblade's body jerk with the electricity. The man went limp for just a moment before he seemed to regain control, muscles going tense.

It was not a nice kind of smile, the grin that Tommy gave him. It was cold. Impassive. He learned it from Wilbur.

"Now, let's try this again." Tommy snarled, "Why. Were. You. Following. Me?"

Finally, Techno seemed to realize he wasn't playing around anymore. This wasn't the Tommy who had asked about Prometheus and Atlas, who had thrown little jabs and braided his hair. This was *Theseus*. Techno slumped against the ground, tilting his head back and letting out a resigned sigh. "I was curious."

That--that was all he had? Master strategist, ruthless warrior Technoblade, and the best excuse he could come up with was that he was *curious*?

"You were curious." Tommy scoffed, raising a disbelieving eyebrow. "You expect me to believe that? You were *curious*. Okay. Sure."

Tommy leaned down close. His voice went sharp. "Well, the next time you're feeling curious, maybe remember that curiosity killed the cat, okay Techno? Because that idiom is going to become very, very literal if you decide to follow me again. You're lucky I don't just put a dagger through your throat right now. You got me?"

Technoblade stared at him for a long, long moment. Tommy's expression stayed steel. For just a second, Tommy thought he saw a flash of understanding. A realization of some sorts. In the next instant it was gone, and Techno gave him a solemn nod.

Tommy lifted his foot from Techno's chest. He snatched the dagger pinning down his cloak, drew back the staff hovering at his neck. He didn't turn his back on the man as he began to back into the shadows of the

alleyway. Techno pushed himself off of the ground, crouching on one knee. His red eyes bored into Tommy.
“Be careful. Don’t test your luck out there.”

Shrouded in shadow, silent and cruel as a knife, Tommy let himself smile. “I don’t need luck, Technoblade. I have skill.”

Chapter End Notes

if one more person tells me wilbur cant be redeemed i will in fact just make this a hurt no comfort and
he WILL be the villain.
not a threat, its a promise

ANYWAY HOPE YOU ENJOYED HAVE A NICE THANKSGIVING LOVE YOU GUYS <333333

Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

There's four days left at the Feral base, and everything is going spectacularly wrong.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Having the gang in the Feral base was becoming much more fun now that Tommy was showing them up. First with dinner, then taking down fucking *Technoblade*, and now he was snubbing Wilbur. Could things get any better than that?

Wilbur had been, to put it mildly, gloating ever since they had struck their deal. He seemed to think they had this whole thing in the bag, and was determined to rub it in Tommy's face, whether it was cooing when he stumbled out of his room for breakfast, or ruffling his hair with literally every opportunity he got, or, worst of all, following him around like a lost puppy, chattering on and on as if everything between them was perfectly ordinary. Sending Tommy tiny little smug, possessive grins when he thought he wasn't looking.

It was only when Tommy returned from his first job of the week covered in half a gallon of blood and completely sans one Technoblade that Wilbur began to falter.

"Is that yours?" He hissed, eyes wide with alarm. He was already pushing himself up from where he had thrown himself across the couch as Tommy slung a bag stuffed with forty thousand Primes onto the floor and trudged past Wilbur, across the room to the kitchen.

"Nope." Tommy grunted as he slammed open the medical cabinet and pulled out a roll of gauze.

Wilbur locked onto it instantly, pushing himself further off the couch. "Are you hurt?"

Tommy really wasn't in the mood for this shit. A messy job would do that to you—he was exhausted, and grumpy, and frankly a little sick of dealing with the Antarctic gang's antics. He didn't want to go through this stupid argument again; he just wanted to patch up his injuries and go sulk in his room.

"No." He hissed, but his face betrayed him as he wrapped the bandages around a particularly deep cut on his forearm, and Wilbur was off the couch and hovering at his side in an instant.

"Let me--" Wilbur made little grabby hands towards the gauze like a *toddler*—it was times like this that Tommy wondered how the hell *he* was one of the most feared men in the criminal underground— but his eyes were as intense as ever. Wilbur was dead serious.

Tommy scowled, yanking the supplies away from him. "I'm fine."

He turned back to the gash along his arm, pointedly ignoring Wilbur as he dabbed at it with some cloth, wincing at the sting as he tried to scrub the dirt out of the wound. A few minutes later, Tommy looked up to grab the bottle of liquor they used to clean injuries and jolted back with a start when he realized Wilbur was *still* just standing there, watching him.

Tommy raised a single eyebrow—*why are you still watching me, idiot?*--and Wilbur popped his knuckles, frowning.

His brow was furrowed. “Where, uh—did you happen to see Techno around?”

Oh, so that’s what this was about? Wilbur was upset that Tommy lost his guard dog? Didn’t think it was possible for the great, unstoppable Technoblade to be, well, *stopped* by someone like him? Tommy couldn’t help but let out a sharp, bitter laugh. “Oh, I saw him alright.”

He gave Wilbur a smile with far too many teeth to be friendly. “Me and him had a nice chat.”

Wilbur’s eyes narrowed. “Tommy—”

The retort was there, waiting on the tip of his tongue, something sharp and scathing and sure to start another row between the two of them, and Tommy’s lips parted to say it when—suddenly, Tommy realized he was tired. Not the bone-deep physical exhaustion that always seemed to follow him anyways, but really, truly, mentally weary.

He didn’t want to fight with Wilbur, not really.

He slumped against the countertop, sighing long and deep in a way that made Wilbur frown harder.

“I’m fine.” Tommy muttered, but his voice had lost its heat, “Stay away from me.”

Wilbur, seeming to sense that he was winning this little argument, gave him a smug grin.

“That wasn’t part of the deal, Toms.” he sang, ruffling Tommy’s hair, and Tommy was hit with another pang of *something*. Guess Wilbur had picked up on Phil’s nickname then.

Tommy didn’t like it. He didn’t.

He shoved Wilbur’s hand away from his hair, looking away. Snatching the liquor bottle and unscrewing the top. “I’m not in the mood, Wilbur.”

“Yeah, well neither am I, Sunshine.” Wilbur snapped back, ignoring the way Tommy bristled at the new term of endearment, “Let me help.”

It wasn’t, Tommy noted, phrased as a question.

No. No, no, *no* he was too damn tired to deal with Wilbur’s possessive bullshit today. He’d just find somewhere else to clean himself up, somewhere without him lurking around, messing with his head. He didn’t need this right now.

So Tommy pushed himself off the counter, grabbed all of the medical supplies, and made to storm past Wilbur toward the door.

Wilbur, of course, stepped in front of him before he could reach it.

“What part of *no* did you not understand?” Tommy grunted, glaring up at him, “I don’t need you. I’m perfectly fine, so *fuck. off.*”

“You’re perfectly fine, *fucking—*” Wilbur scoffed, throwing his arms in the air before gesturing wildly at Tommy’s skinny, bruised frame, “Tommy, have you *seen* yourself? Even without all of the blood, you look like—”

Wilbur cut himself off, realizing he was on the edge of going too far, but it was too late. His point was clear. Tommy looked like a *ghost*.

Tommy knew, deep down, that Wilbur was right.

He'd be lying if he said he hadn't gotten worse.

It was there in the dark, almost black half moons under each eye, such a deep purple that it looked like he had been punched in the face repeatedly. It was there in the way his usually fluffy hair had grown ruly and unkempt and greasy without it constantly being run through by strong, steady fingers, hanging around his face in limp, tangled strands. It was there in the way he tossed and turned in his bed at night, waking up screaming or crying or afraid. It was there in the way his clothes hung off his too thin-frame.

He'd been skinny before, back in the slums of Eastside—this was more than that somehow; despite full meals and more sleep than ever, he was losing weight, not gaining it. He was growing weaker, more tired, more apathetic, with each passing day.

He didn't know why the gaping hole in his chest only seemed to be growing, consuming him from the inside out. He couldn't quite pinpoint why most days he couldn't muster up any real emotion except that same, stale anger that had fueled him for all those years. There was really only one thing that was certain.

Tommy was getting worse, and he knew it.

So when Wilbur called him out on all this, Tommy couldn't help it—he hesitated, shoulders sagging just a bit. He was so tired. Surely, it wouldn't hurt just to let Wilbur help him out this once? No, no that was what Wilbur wanted, Tommy couldn't give in, he couldn't lose this stupi—

Wilbur's hand came up to cradle Tommy's cheek, somehow both gentle and firm all at once, and Tommy froze.

"Clearly, you don't know how to take care of yourself. Clearly, you haven't been getting the support you need, Toms. *Clearly*, I can't trust you with your own wellbeing." Wilbur's thumb ran over his cheek. Tommy blinked, opening his mouth to protest—he could take care of himself just *fine*, thank you very much—or maybe just kick him in the shin, and then he reconsidered it.

He knew that look in Wilbur's eye too well. Firm, resolute, entirely sure of himself—Wilbur was determined to get his way on this. Arguing would be pointless.

It was all but confirmed when Wilbur gestured back toward the kitchen counter and sent him another Look. "If you won't take care of yourself, then I will. Sit. Down."

Tommy sat.

It wasn't an admission of defeat, he told himself, as Wilbur knelt next to him and wiped the dirt out of his cuts gentler than he thought possible. It wasn't a loss, he insisted, as the man dabbed the alcohol against his injuries and whispered soft comfort when Tommy winced at the sting. It certainly wasn't anything like that at all, he repeated, as Wilbur wrapped the bandages around his forearm with quiet care.

He wasn't quite sure if he believed himself.

Wilbur looked up at him with a smile—a real one, not one of the smug ones, he could tell by the way his eyes crinkled—and patted his head. "There you go. Was that so hard?"

It wasn't. It wasn't hard at all, to let Wilbur take care of him, to just soak up the soft affection like a ray of sunlight and not worry about his job or his future or the inevitable decision he'd have to make when the week was over. He could just sit there and slump into the gentle hand steadying his shoulder and let himself drift. It was easy. Painfully easy.

And that was *terrifying*. He couldn't fall back into this trap again. He had left the gang for a reason, and that was something he couldn't lose sight of.

So Tommy forced that old anger to rise up again and met it like an old friend—pulling it close to his chest, letting it simmer under his skin, hardening his resolve—and pushed himself off the countertop without another word.

“What are you doing?” Wilbur asked him, half confused, half concerned, as Tommy stalked past him and headed for the door.

A clatter came from somewhere behind him, the sound of steel heels against tile, and within a second Wilbur was hovering over his shoulder again, trailing after him. Tommy could feel his eyes burning into the side of his face.

He forced himself not to look back, not to meet his gaze. Tommy had always been too transparent, too expressive—his eyes would give away everything.

“I’m a busy man, Wilbur.” he said instead, trudging towards the armory wing of the base. He’d thought about going to his room, just sleeping the day away but...he didn’t really want to be alone with his traitorous thoughts right now. At least in the forge he’d have something to keep himself busy with. Tubbo had told him he needed more practice anyway.

Wilbur, never one to give up, followed behind him. One of his knuckles popped anxiously. “Tommy, wait, why don’t we go to your garden for a few minutes or—”

“I have business. I’ll see you later.” Tommy huffed. Quiet and cold, and so very unlike himself.

He’d gotten sharper since he left the Depths. More rigid, more prickly, more suspicious. Maybe it was the stinging wound still festering in his heart, or maybe it was just what being back in the slums was doing to him, but he had changed. Exhibit A—he had decked fucking Technoblade and then told him off like some sort of misbehaving toddler. He never would have done that before; six months ago if he had even spotted someone as dangerous, as genuinely imposing, as him he would have swiped out his feet and then *ran*.

He had been smart then. Quick and stubborn and clever. Now he was just angry and empty and cold. Tommy kept stomping towards the armory.

It was clear that Wilbur was not exactly a fan of this from the frustrated huff of air he exhaled. Tommy could almost see the furrow in his brow.

“You can’t get fucking pissed at me because I *helped* you.” He snapped, hovering even closer behind Tommy.

“I’m not angry.” Tommy retorted. Angrily.

“You’re not.” Wilbur scoffed, and Tommy could feel the weight of his gaze again, heavy with disbelief, “Really.”

“Leave me *alone*, Wilbur.” Tommy hissed, shoving open the door to the forge and heading over to the table he’d left all of his scraps at, still pointedly ignoring the man standing next to him as he snatched his latest gun design off a nearby shelf.

Wilbur began muttering under his breath, pacing angrily as he watched it all go down.

“I don’t understand what it is you want from me.” He exclaimed.

Tommy snatched another spring from a drawer and stabbed it into place before slamming the compartment shut and throwing open the safe vault that housed his personal set of work-in-progress long range weapons. “What I *want* is for you to let me sit here and build my guns in peace for once—”

Out of the corner of his eye, Wilbur went eerily still.

Alarm bells began to go off in Tommy's mind. His head snapped to Wilbur, who was staring at something just over Tommy's shoulder. Tommy followed his gaze and...

"Toms--Tommy, is that--?" Wilbur whispered, and Tommy couldn't tell whether it was awe or confusion tainting his voice, "Is that a revolver?"

A moment too late, Tommy realized his mistake.

You see, now that Tommy was employed under the Feral Boys, he was finding that he had a lot more free time on his hands. Before he would have read with Techno or gardened with Phil, even earlier than that and he would have been pickpocketing so he could eat dinner--he just couldn't exactly do any of that anymore. The city was off limits except for the most important of missions, including for visiting Tubbo and Ranboo, as part of his whole 'laying low' plan.

Instead, he'd been using all of his excess free time sparring, cultivating his tiny garden, and, most recently, trying to learn how to build weapons under the guidance of Tubbo.

In and of itself, that wouldn't be an issue. No, the real problem was that he wasn't just building regular guns; he was also building a revolver.

He didn't know why he had built Wilbur's favorite gun, or why he had carved the handle out of rich wood and engraved swirling designs in it. He didn't know why he'd made the gun at all. He didn't even like revolvers. He liked little, scrappy pistols, with their quiet firing and easily concealable frame. Revolvers were bulky and loud and brash and you couldn't shoot straight with them for shit. Why the hell would he spend so much time perfecting a revolver?

The answer was there, shoved deep down inside his chest, but Tommy didn't plan on confronting that truth, not ever, and he certainly wasn't about to let Wilbur figure it out either.

"Yeah." He snapped, too late and too aggressive to be anything other than a weak defense, "So? My friend's been teaching me about their mechanics. I needed some practice."

Wilbur's eyes were practically glowing with amusement. "You hate revolvers. You said there was 'too much fuckin' kick to even shoot straight'"

He...uh, he had said that, hadn't he? Tommy's face went hot with embarrassment, Shit. Wilbur began striding towards him, towards the gun, and Tommy panicked.

No way was he letting Wilbur see it, not over his dead body--he'd see the care put into it and connect the dots and that would just be way too humiliating for him to handle. He needed to think of an explanation but--fuck what could he even say??--and Wilbur's eyes were gleaming at him in that too-knowing way, and *shit shit shit time to misdirect, cover up, scramble*, something, anything.

"I'm just...trying something different. Exploring my options and all that shit." Tommy mentally patted himself on the back. A perfect cover up. Wilbur would suspect nothing.

Wilbur hummed under his breath, striding across the room and reaching around him to pick the weapon up. Tilting it one way and another, lips twitching as his eyes flashed over the careful engraving on the handle. Considering it. Judging his work.

Tommy's heart kicked up a notch.

Was--was he going to like it? Not that Tommy cared about his opinion or anything just...he was just curious, whether, maybe, Wilbur might like to shoot it or something. For no reason at all. He was just. Wondering.

"It's nicely made." Wilbur said out of the blue, "Good build. Put together very well."

Tommy looked down at his hands, clasped on the work table, to hide the heat burning in his cheeks, the unwilling smile that was rising on his face. “Yeah? So you, uh...you like it?”

He didn’t care what Wilbur thought. Obviously. He didn’t. He was just wondering if, from a completely objective standpoint, the gun was functional. That’s all.

“Oh, I love it. It needs a little polishing of course, but a gun like this? It’d be a delight to shoot with.” Wilbur’s voice was impossibly fond. Tommy glanced up to see him holding up the revolver, checking down the sights, testing its weight in his hands, and his smile grew.

Tommy shrugged, carefully nonchalant. “I mean. I’ve been meaning to go out and practice my shooting a little bit.”

If it was even possible, Wilbur seemed to get even more excited, leaning in closer. “You’ve been practicing? Has your aim gotten any better?”

Tommy frowned, a little miffed. What was wrong with his aim *before*, huh? Sure, he’d missed the target a few times, but just because there were a couple extra holes in the Antarctic gang’s ceiling didn’t mean he was a bad shot.

“*Has my aim gotten any better*, you know what, fuck you, Wilbur. I’m *better* than you now, dickhead. Total sharpshooter.”

“You are?” Wilbur raised an eyebrow at him with clear disbelief. A challenge. A *taunt*.

Tommy really was too stubborn for his own good. It was an obvious bait. Clear as day. He’d have to be an idiot to fall for it. Still, Wilbur had issued him a challenge, and Tommy would be damned if he backed down now.

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?” he hmped, “You gone deaf along with stupid?”

“Fine, Toms.” Wilbur’s eyes were lit with a dangerous, amused sparkle, “You up for a little bit of friendly competition?”

Wilbur peered down over the edge of the rooftop, surveying the busy market below. “So I just call out a target and shoot? How do we decide the winner, moondrop?”

The nickname hit Tommy square in the chest, sending him stumbling back a step, out of breath, heat rushing into his cheeks.

He flushed in embarrassment, looking down at his hands. “Stop it with the fuckin’--”

His eyes flickered back over to Wilbur. At first it was just because he was afraid Wilbur had noticed his unease, his moment of weakness, but then he spotted something else: Wilbur was trying to suppress a grin.

He was trying to get a reaction out of him. Tommy scowled. “No, you know what, not even going to respond. Fuck you. I’m not going to let you distract me.”

Wilbur just smiled at him innocently. “I have no idea what you could possibly mean, starlight?”

What, exactly, was his game here? Just keep calling him different nicknames until he cracked? Well, he would have to be disappointed then. It wasn’t affecting him at all. Definitely not.

Well.

Maybe a little bit.

Tommy just forced himself to ignore it. "Most impressive target wins, see? But you have to actually hit it. You miss and you're disqualified."

"A game of wits, really." Wilbur said with a thoughtful hum, "You know I'm the gang's strategist, right? You sure this is the battle you want to fight?"

Dear Prime, he really was confident, wasn't he? Tommy was going to enjoy putting him in his place.

Hopefully. Wilbur *was* a good shot.

"It sounds to me like you're just scared." Tommy poked him, "Shoot, dickhead. We don't have all day."

Wilbur sighed, but it was an almost fond noise, like saying *if you insist*. He patted Tommy's shoulder--Tommy could almost hear his voice saying *let me show you how it's done, Toms*--as he pulled out his revolver, *Tommy's* revolver, and aimed it down at the street.

"I'll start easy." Wilbur said, as if to reassure him, "The center of the Manburg flag, four o'clock."

One quiet bang--thank goodness for the silencers, or they'd be discovered in an instant-- and a clean, round hole appeared perfectly in the center of the black and red flag. Wilbur looked up from his revolver with a pleased hum and a smug glance Tommy's way.

Child's play. Wilbur thought that would be enough to scare Tommy off? As if.

"I'll raise. Loaf of bread, right there." He pointed to a red and white market stall thirty meters off and watched with great satisfaction as Wilbur raised his eyebrows, "On that woman's stand. See?"

Wilbur nodded, gestured for him to go ahead, and Tommy, without pause, raised his pistol, cocked the barrel, closed one eye, and pulled the trigger. The loaf of bread flew off of the stand. The baker's head whipped back and forth in confusion, searching for the source, and Tommy lowered the gun with a flourish.

He glanced at Wilbur and couldn't help the cackle that slipped out when he saw that his mouth had fallen open. "I told you I could shoot."

To his credit, Wilbur recovered from his shock quickly. The next time Tommy looked over at the man, his mouth was shut and his eyes were glittering like fire.

"You did. That was very good, Tommy." Something in Tommy's chest warmed at the man's praise, even as his expression got sharper, more competitive. "Just not good enough to beat me."

Wilbur had always been a little bit of an egomaniac. No way was he about to let Tommy, the kid who hadn't even *touched* a gun six months earlier, beat him.

His eyes narrowed. "See that guard? The one with the mustache and the scowl? The too-big boots?"

Tommy did see them. They were hard to miss, what with the arms like tree trunks, and hands that could probably snap his neck, and the military-grade gun at their side.

Now, Tommy wasn't usually one to turn down messing with guards, but even this seemed like a little much. "Wilbur, is that a good idea? I'm all for fucking up some of those power-hungry bastards, but wouldn't it be better to do it when we...you know, have some actual weapons?"

Wilbur didn't even look his way. "Nope. Three inches over his right shoulder."

Before Tommy could protest or maybe insist that this *really* wasn't a good idea, Wilbur heated up the revolver, looked down the barrel, and pulled the trigger.

The guard didn't even blink as the bullet flashed past them and embedded itself in the wall. Three inches over their right shoulder.

Wilbur turned to him with an extremely self-satisfied expression. "Good game, Toms. Nothing to be ashamed of, I've been doing this a lot longer than you. I'll probably only hold it over your head a tiny bit--"

"Through the center of the hat and out the back without touching a single hair on his head." Tommy snapped before he could even process his mouth had moved.

Wilbur's grin stuttered. "Tommy--"

A quiet shot rang out through the air.

The guard's hat flew off his head.

Wilbur stared. Tommy stared.

What--where had that even come from? Tommy could shoot, but not like *that*.

"No. *No*. You didn't." Wilbur gasped once he finally regained control of his motor functions, "You little gremlin fuck. Where have you been hiding all this? Excuse me?"

Tommy still a little dazed, but aware enough to realize he had just won their game, just beamed up at the man, "I am simply a god."

A startled laugh burst out of Wilbur's mouth. "Sure you are, sunshine. I'll give you this one, just once."

"I--really?"

Wilbur ruffled his hair. "Good job, Toms. Very well done."

He loaded a bullet into the chamber and spun the cylinder shut with a playful wink Tommy's way. "But you're absolutely insane if you think I'm going to let that stand. Round two, gremlin child."

"*Child?*" Tommy shrieked, throwing his magazine at Wilbur, who dodged it effortlessly to his immense annoyance, "You know what, bitch, my target this round is you."

Wilbur raised his hands in mock surrender as Tommy stalked closer, "Toms--Tommy, wait, let's talk about this--"

Tommy tackled him to the ground.

By the time Tommy and Wilbur stumbled back into the Feral complex, high off laughter, it was the dead of night, and Tommy was taunting the man like there was no tomorrow.

"--the great Siren, bestest by wittle ol' me, how does it feel--" he poked at Wilbur's shoulder with a self-satisfied grin, staring up at him with blue eyes practically glowing with mirth.

Wilbur scowled good-naturedly, pushing him away, "Next time I'm going to throw you off the Walls myself, you little--"

Wilbur froze. Tommy froze. This was dangerous ground, and they both knew it; Wilbur drew back, expression flashing with guilt, "Toms, I--"

With a feral shout, Tommy leapt onto Wilbur's back, clinging around his neck to try and bring him down to the ground. The man shrieked, letting out a jumble of curses—*Fuck, shit, Toms Tommy, what are you— did you just bite me? What the—*as he tried to reach around his body to pull him off, but Tommy just clung tighter, his battle cry dissolving into a fit of wild giggling, "Too soon, Will! Too soon, I can not *believe--*"

"Tommy." A voice cut through the laughter. The two of them went still. Tommy's eyes shot towards the voice.

George was standing in the middle of the hallway, arms crossed, looking entirely unimpressed as he stared the two of them down.

Well shit.

"Oh. 404." Tommy choked out, "Hi."

George glanced between the two of them, and faster than he thought possible, Tommy was untangling the jumble of limbs and shoving himself away from Wilbur, standing to attention.

"Dinner is at 2100. You know that." The man said, voice cold. The demand for an explanation was very obviously implied.

Next to him, Wilbur crossed his arms over his chest lazily, giving George a frankly disrespectful look. Tommy not-so-subtly kicked him in the shin.

"I lost track of the time." Tommy replied, and it was the truth; he really had just been having such a good time with Wilbur on the rooftops of the mid-ring that he'd forgotten about the Feral boys entirely.

"Dinner is mandatory, Theseus." George sighed like he was immensely disappointed in Tommy, and the boy's expression dimmed ever so slightly. Wilbur took a menacing step forward, and Tommy shot him a look. *Go*

Wilbur watched him, hesitating for a long second, before he nodded once and retreated down the hallway.

"I know, I know," Tommy rushed to explain as soon as Wilbur was out of earshot, "but Wilbur and I went out to the city and, Prime you shoulda seen me George. I shot right above this guard's--"

"Tommy." Tommy's face went solemn at the man's unyielding tone. "I'll give you a pass for this. I know things are...interesting for you right now. Just for this week, you may miss dinner if you must. After that I'll expect you to be back on time."

A breath of relief escaped him. "This is why you're my favorite, Gogy."

"Karl left a plate of food in your room." The man told him, "Get some rest, Theseus. You look tired."

"Sir, yes, sir. Will do, boss man." Tommy saluted him with a grin and spun to go back to his room.

"And...Tommy?" George called, as Tommy walked away, "I will accept your decision. Regardless of who you choose."

Tommy's head shot back to face the man. "George...I--"

"I'm not blind. Nor am I an idiot. If you want to go with them, no one here will stop you." George turned to go, "Just think about what you want Tommy. We would give you a good life here, should you choose it."

With the words heavy on his mind, Tommy retreated back to his room for a night of fitful, restless sleep.

“You’re a bitch.” Tommy snapped as he dodged the blast of yet another grenade by a hair's width. “This is a bitch move.”

Seriously, where had Sapnap even gotten all of these bombs? It wasn't like gunpowder was easy to find these days. You would think the Feral gang wouldn't want all of their explosives used up in a training exercise.

Sapnap didn't seem to mind wasting their weaponry though--yet another bomb materialized in the palm of his hand. Where the hell was he pulling them all from? He--his pants had like *two* fuckin' pockets, there was no way he could fit that many in there.

“What do you mean?” Sapnap cackled as another one of Tommy’s knives whistled past his head, “This is perfectly legal. No holds barred in the sparring arena, Theseus, that’s what I told you.”

Out of the corner of his eye there was movement--the door to the training center opening--and a flash of pink. Tommy was too locked in on the fight, on circling the arena, to give it any more attention.

“You did *not* clarify that ‘no holds barred’ included--” Sapnap’s arm drew back, and Tommy groaned, leaping out of the way as yet another grenade soared past his body. “Oh my Prime, you dickhead-- fucking *bombs*, Sapnap.”

Tommy dashed forward, sweeping his staff towards Sapnap’s feet, and the man leapt backward, dancing just out of his reach. Then he was approaching again, jumping back into the push and pull of battle, stalking toward Tommy with his sword loosely hanging by his side.

“Bro, real talk--” Sapnap started as he slashed the iron blade at Tommy’s face, “Have you ever seen me *without* bombs?”

He...he did have a point there. Explosives were sort of Sapnap’s thing. Tommy should’ve known he wouldn’t be one to fight fair. He ducked under the blade and darted away, putting some distance between them.

“Only when you’re committing arson. Shoulda--” Another explosion to his right, and Tommy dived away from the ball of flames with a grunt, “*Fucking* known.”

It was when he pushed himself off the ground from the roll, leaping back onto his feet, that he finally saw him.

The training room was a colosseum-like structure; a round, stone room with a pit in the center of it for the wide, sandy fighting arena and a raised, circular walkway around the outside for any observers.

It was there, casually leaning over the railing, that Tommy spotted Technoblade.

“Holy shit, is that fucking--who the fuck even told him where the training center was?” Tommy muttered, wiping a hand across his sweaty forehead before waving up at the man, “Techno!”

Now, don’t get him wrong, he was still pissed at Techno for following him around. That wasn’t something he was getting over anytime soon, and he wasn’t forgiving him or anything, and he still definitely wanted to punch him right in his stupid face, and he hated his guts, of course. But...

Still. It wasn’t everyday that *the* Technoblade came to watch your training session, okay? So he was a little bit excited to get some feedback, sue him.

He’d certainly improved in his time gone. He’d been training more than ever. Surely, Technoblade would be a little impressed, right?

Even from down in the pit Tommy could see Techno's little amused *heh*, his shoulders rising and falling with the chuckle as he nodded once at him, and Tommy *beamed*.

Techno's eyes flickered to something behind him and went instantly dark, flashing back to Tommy, wide with alarm, "Theseus—"

There was a *click*, the clang of metal rolling against the ground, and, a second too late, Tommy realized that he'd forgotten about something crucial.

Sapnap.

With that realization came the flash of light, the burst of heat, and the shockwave of power from behind him and suddenly he was airborne, spinning through the open air. Tommy had time to form a single, barely coherent thought—*well, shit*—before he was slamming into the sand and gravel, his body bouncing across the floor from the force of his momentum. His head jerked with every movement, as he landed on his hands, then his side, his head, his side again, before he finally rolled to a stop on his back.

For a second there was nothing but the ringing in his ears and a bright, piercing light.

"Prime. Fuck." He mumbled, as he tried to blink the spots out of his eyes through wave after wave of pain, "*Fuuuuckkkkk*. Shit."

"I can't tell if this is the head wound or whether those are legitimately the only words in your vocabulary." A dry voice commented from somewhere above him. Something prodded gently at his forehead, pushing back his hair.

Tommy just groaned, pressing a hand to his pounding forehead, and the voice softened. "You okay, kid?"

It was painfully familiar. Tommy forced his eyes open to see a blurry form of pink hair and a pinched brow and broad shoulders leaning over him.

"Tech?" He mumbled. How had he even gotten down into the arena so quickly? It was like a twenty foot drop from the observation arena, where had he--?

Techno brushed back his hair, going to pick out some of the gravel that had embedded itself in his forehead, until Tommy lightly swatted at his hand, pushing him away. "I—I'm fine. Where's that dumb fuckin—"

"Theseus!" A new voice from across the room, shouting loud enough that Tommy winced, "Gotta keep your eyes on the prize, dude. I meant it when I said no holds barred. The fight doesn't stop for anything or anyone."

At his side, Tommy felt Techno's entire body go tense.

Even through the pain Tommy managed to lift his head off the ground to frown at Sapnap, who was strolling towards them with a triumphant grin. "You're a right asshole. You know that?"

Sapnap just cackled—even with the obvious irritation clouding Tommy's tone it was impossible not to notice the fondness that was there too. There was no real anger behind the words.

"Yeah, but I'm an asshole who's won, so—"

Tommy pushed himself upright, ignoring the quiet, worried noise coming from Techno at the movement, just so he could level a glare at the man.

"Go die. Die. Throw yourself off the Light's skyline." He grunted, but he was clearly more tired than normal. His voice held none of its usual bite.

"Better luck next time." Sapnap taunted, turning to head back to the weapons rack.

Techno looked away from Tommy, sending an impassive look towards the man, though his hand remained firmly planted against Tommy's back, supporting him. "What'd you say your name was? Sad App?"

Sapnap glanced over his shoulder, blinking in disbelief. "Dude. You've been living in our base for the last four days. How the hell do you not know our names?"

"I don't care." Techno said simply, "About your names. I don't care. I care about Theseus. Not you."

"Well." Tommy didn't think he had ever seen Sapnap as off-kilter as he was then, shifting on his feet uncomfortably as Techno stared him down. "Sapnap. It's Sapnap."

Techno hummed in a way that implied he hadn't been listening whatsoever. "I've been hoping to try out the training center here. Now seems convenient. Would a duel suit you?"

Now, Tommy might not have been that tuned in to the conversation at the moment--he was much too occupied picking out the pieces of gravel under his skin--but even he noticed that the ensuing stare off between the two was anything but outright hostile. Techno's eyes were narrowed, intense, and glaring directly at Sapnap.

The hand supporting his shoulder tightened into a viselike grip, and though Tommy was almost entirely sure it was an unintentional response, it was painful enough that he grimaced and whispered an uncertain *Techno?*

Technoblade's head shot to face him at the noise, and his gaze was so intense that Tommy couldn't help but flinch back.

That was all it took for the tension in the room to snap. Techno's eyes widened--he dropped his hand from Tommy's shoulder like he'd been burned. Sapnap's hand drifted away from where it'd been resting on the sword at his side.

"Five minutes. Be ready." Sapnap told him before he stalked off to the other side of the arena, probably to get some more grenades ready.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Techno turned to him with thinly-veiled concern. "Theseus. I didn't mean to--are you alright?"

Tommy waved him off. "I'm good, Blade. I'll guilt the hell out of Sapnap for it later and he'll give me his dessert or something."

Techno didn't exactly look convinced.

Tommy tried to calm him. "Really, Tech-no-blade. I'll walk it off."

Technoblade frowned. "You're sounding out the syllables of my name like they're separate words, Tommy."

"And?" Tommy asked before realizing that he wasn't exactly doing a great job of reassuring the man and quickly changing gears, "Did you see my fight?"

Masterful subject change on his part. Tommy gave himself a mental high five. Techno loved talking about sparring--it would definitely distract him.

That was the only reason he asked, of course. It wasn't like he actually cared about Techno's feedback or anything, just because he was like, the best fighter in the city or whatever. He didn't care about that at all.

The edges of Techno's mouth twitched upward. It seemed Tommy had won one of his rare grins, though he didn't have a clue what the man could possibly be smiling about.

"I did." Techno pushed himself off the ground, patting Tommy's shoulder once in quiet approval as he did, "Your technique has improved, Theseus. You would be a formidable match in any battle."

Tommy grinned as Techno stretched out a hand to help him off the ground. "You're saying I could take you."

Technoblade made an affronted noise. "That—that is *not* what I said. Not even remotely close."

Tommy shook his head stubbornly, trailing behind Techno as the man led them towards the ladder out of the arena. "Uh uh uh, no taking it back now—you *would be a formidable match in any battle* you just said, which means I would be a formidable battle against *you*, Tech-no-blade."

Techno chose to ignore him completely that time, and Tommy took it as a clear sign of victory.

"I really am going to have to take a look at your head later, aren't I?" The man asked as he pulled Tommy up the last rung of the ladder and gently leaned him up against the railing of the observation area.

He hesitated there for a moment, fretting silently over Tommy's injuries, using his thumb to wipe away the few drops of blood that were rolling down from his hair, ignoring Tommy's feeble attempts to swat his hands away. He picked another piece of gravel put from Tommy's golden curls and the boy groaned, reaching up to push him away. Techno just caught his hand as he did, changing focus from his head to pulling the debris out from his palms.

Tommy rolled his eyes, pulling away and waving him off again. "I'm fiiinnneee. Go kick Sapnap's ass for me, will you Blade?"

For a moment, Techno looked a little torn, his eyes flickering back and forth between Sapnap, waiting for him in the arena, and Tommy, propped up against the observation railing.

He surveyed the boy for another long, thorough moment, before finally his shoulders fell and he sighed, turning toward the arena. "Don't go too far."

Tommy saw right through the words; he snorted. "Oh my gosh, you absolute soft fucker. Yes, I'll stay to watch you fight. I need to make sure you don't murder him, anyway."

With an unfriendly grunt that didn't exactly inspire confidence in Sapnap's safety and a final parting nod, Techno hurdled over the railing and jumped down to the arena below (*show off*), grabbed the longsword he'd left lying on the ground, and strode towards the center of the arena to meet Sapnap for their duel.

They shook hands, Techno strangely formal, Sapnap unusually intense, and each took five long steps to opposite sides of the arena before they turned towards each other and lunged.

Tommy, honestly, expected the fight to be over in seconds.

Techno was a master of his craft, after all, and Sapnap, though certainly an intimidating opponent, was just some guy.

But as Techno danced literal circles around the arena, and Sapnap met each blow with blunt, powerful swings, Tommy realized it might be a much longer battle than he had thought. The two were fighting with an energy he hadn't before seen from either of them, and although they were certainly different fighters, they both had unique, powerful styles.

Sapnap was made of fiery brute force, slashing and swinging and pushing his attacker into constant defense. It was choppy and harsh, and relied completely on catching his opponent unaware; Techno moved with an

almost unnatural grace behind the force of his blows, spinning and ducking and dodging all of Sapnap's strikes with an elegance Tommy had never quite been able to master. His sword became an extension of his body--Tommy couldn't even comprehend how he managed it.

Most swordsmen Tommy had met played a delicate game of compromise in battle--giving up speed for strength or power for agility--Techno, it seemed, was one of the rare few who had chosen neither.

So the battle raged on, each of them holding their own. Five minutes passed, then ten. Tommy would never admit it, but every time Techno hit a strike, he cheered. Again, don't get him wrong; Technoblade was still on thin fucking ice, but this was *The Blade*. Tommy couldn't *not* root for him, right?

In the end, all it took was a single misstep, a single second of Sapnap losing his balance. He recovered quickly, almost instantly, but by then it was too late. Tommy watched with bated breath as Techno locked in on the minuscule falter, and knew it was over.

A second later, Sapnap was sprawled across the ground with a blade pointed at his throat, and Tommy was cheering wildly from the observation deck.

Techno's sword lingered at Sapnap's neck a millisecond too long. Tommy saw his mouth moving for a second, a grim nod from Sapnap, and then Techno was gripping the man's hand in his and pulling him to his feet.

They shook hands, just once, before Techno spun on his heel and marched toward the ladder out of the arena.

"Technoblade! You just--you absolutely wasted him." Tommy shouted when he finally made it out of the arena. "I--you have to teach me how to fight like that, you have to, please, that was insane, you just swooped under his feet, and *bam* he was down. So cool, I swear to Prime."

"I'll teach you whatever you'd like, Theseus." Technoblade told him with a half-grin, and that was that.

He went out for a slightly more...hands on mission that afternoon.

It was supposed to be simple. Another retrieval mission, another job stealing Primes from one of the weaker gangs on the city, nothing special. It was supposed to be easy.

It was not.

Three of the men had swords. Two had guns. One wielded a wickedly sharp, silver, scythe that looked like it would cut through flesh like air.

They were all trying to kill him. Of course.

Tommy stabbed his staff straight into the shoulder of the first swordsman's and out the other end, jerking it out with a spurt of crimson and whirling just as a sword cut down next to him. Swooping towards the ground, he snatched the dagger from his boot and used it to slice the Achilles Tendon of the next guard. They collapsed to the ground with a bloodcurdling shriek.

A flash of silver in the corner of his eye. *Shit*. Tommy rolled out of the way with a yelp just as another sword sliced towards his face.

It clanged against the floor as it whizzed past his forehead. Two wisps of hair floated to the ground.

Well. That was a little too close for comfort.

He pushed himself off the ground just as the man went to slash at him again, stabbing his staff into his stomach with a crackling *zap* that sent the man flying back into the nearest brick wall.

A bullet sang through the air, flying past his shoulder and Tommy turned to the guard with the pistol, sweeping his legs out from underneath him with a grunt and zapping him with his staff for good measure.

And then there were two.

Tommy went for the one with the scythe first—they were more versatile than swords, more lethal in the hands of a capable user, and he would rather not turn his back on them. Scythe guy went for his face—which, honestly, was a little bit aggressive, right? Like, sure, Tommy had electrocuted this guy's friends a tad but his *face*? Aiming for his neck would be a perfectly efficient way to cut his throat, they didn't need to ruin his frankly *amazing* face while they were at it.

"Really, man?" Tommy huffed, blocking the blade with the middle of his staff.

"Why don't we just talk this out?" he asked, grunting as Scythe Guy twirled the blade and sliced it at his face again.

Okay, this was starting to feel a little personal now.

"Not." Tommy blocked the slice again, twisting out of the way and behind the man, "Cool."

He swung his staff into the center of Scythe Guy's back. The man crumpled to the ground.

Tommy cackled. "Karma, bitch."

In the burst of relief and adrenaline, Tommy failed to notice that he had miscounted.

There were five unconscious bodies sprawled across the ground.

There had been six guards.

He heard it before he saw it. The grunt of effort, a *whoosh* of air just over his ear--someone was behind him and they were about to slice through his neck.

What came next was the realization that there was no way to dodge it.

His back was turned, he was too *close*—

If he wasn't dead within the next few seconds, this was going to hurt like fucking *hell*. Tommy braced himself.

Right before the sword hit, just as Tommy was preparing himself for the worst, the guard about to stab through his neck went completely, entirely still. Tommy didn't waste any time being confused by the sudden hesitation, scrambling out of the way, rolling over to his back to look at the guard—

The man, pale and wide-eyed, fell to his knees and slumped to the ground. Unmoving.

A razor sharp feather was lodged four inches into his back.

What the fuck. What the *fuck*.

Did they really think he wouldn't connect the dots for this one? Did they really think he was that much of an idiot, that he wouldn't notice a man just dropping dead without Tommy killing them? That he wouldn't notice a *silver feather*??

“Philza,” he screeched as he slammed open the door to Phil’s room and marched inside, “What the *hell* do you think you’re doing?”

Philza was sitting on his bed, flipping idly through a folder of documents. He glanced up when his room opened, a soft, seemingly-genuine smile spreading across his face when he spotted Tommy in the doorway.

Tommy wasn't so stupid as to fall for his whole innocent act.

“Tommy,” He greeted with a deceptively soft tone. Like he had no idea why Tommy might be storming into his room in the middle of the afternoon. “You seem upset.”

“Really?” Tommy snapped, tone biting, “Really, Phil, do I seem *upset* to you? Whyever might that be?”

Instead of threatened or upset, Phil just looked sort of vaguely amused at the statement. “You alright, mate?”

“Phil. *No*.” Tommy snapped, quickly getting annoyed with how nonchalant Phil was being about the whole thing. “You followed me on a mission. You messed with my work again. I’m pissed.”

Tommy expected an apology, maybe a little bit of groveling. Phil was the reasonable one out of the four of them, after all. Surely he’d understand that he was in the wrong here.

Tommy waited for a sorry. It never came. Phil just glanced up at him, blinked at his expression, and then turned back to his folder.

“Oh. Is that all?” He asked.

One of Tommy’s eyes twitched. The silence in the room grew charged.

Phil just shrugged.

“Mate, I’m not going to apologize for protecting one of my boys.” Phil said, “You were about to be stabbed in the back. I wouldn’t have interfered otherwise.”

Tommy faltered--he couldn't possibly think that was the problem could he?

He looked at Phil. His face was entirely sincere.

Shit.

All of them were idiots. How could they think--why would he be *mad* that he was saved from the blade? That he was uninjured? Why--how would that make sense? He wasn't upset about being helped--he was upset that Phil was even there in the first place.

Tommy pressed his palms against his eyes. “It’s not--you stupid bastard, it’s not about you saving me from that sword, it’s that you were there at all.”

Phil tilted his head. Confused.

Tommy just sighed and pressed on. He should've known Phil wouldn't get it. “You see how this is humiliating, right? You see how offensive it is to follow me on jobs just because you think I'm incapable?”

He had to face the consequences of his own actions--he'd messed up back on that mission, had got too confident, and so he had to pay the price. That was how it had to be. He couldn't have other people stepping in to save him from that, not if he wanted to maintain his reputation. He couldn't exactly keep up the appearance of a lone wolf mercenary with partners watching his every move, covering his back, and saving his skin.

"I follow Wilbur and Techno too, sometimes." Phil tried to console, "It's not that I think they can't take care of things, mate. It's just a precaution."

That one threw him for a bit of a loop. He trailed them too? Surely, Wilbur and Techno would understand his grievances then, *surely*, Techno wouldn't have followed him if he had been through the same sort of shit...

Unless, perhaps, they had come to terms with it. Maybe they liked having Phil there to watch their backs, not having to fear for their lives every second they were out on a job, maybe...

No. *No*, he had talked about this already, he couldn't let them manipulate him again. This was another ploy to get him back in their clutches and nothing more. He had to remember that.

Tommy turned away. "That—that doesn't change anything, Phil. I don't want to be *monitored*, okay? I can handle this stuff myself."

Phil frowned, his lips parting to disagree, but Tommy was already halfway out the door.

Wilbur looked up from where he was sprawled across the couch when Tommy stomped through the kitchen doorway and into the lounge, and almost instantly he set aside the thick folder of city maps he had been flipping through in favor of watching with worried eyes as Tommy tugged off his mission gear.

Tommy ignored his questioning look, pulling off his boots and chucking them at the nearest wall. They hit the ground with an angry thud.

"Tommy?" Wilbur asked, albeit hesitantly, "What's wrong?"

Tommy shrugged off his tool belt and threw it into the corner of the room in a mangled lump. Next came his cloak, which landed on the tool belt in a rumpled heap.

"I can't believe he would—ugh." Tommy cut himself off—he didn't want to yell at Wilbur. Wilbur hadn't—he hadn't done anything wrong, that wouldn't be fair to him. Tommy's shoulders slumped as the anger suddenly drained out of him, leaving only a tired shell in its place.

He was tired of fighting with him. The two of them had finally come to some sort of a tentative truce the day before. He didn't want to ruin it so quickly.

"Phil's been following me. First Techno, and now—I can't deal with it." Tommy wobbled on his feet, voice tinged with exhaustion, and Wilbur made a concerned, sympathetic sound.

"Sit." Wilbur patted the spot on the couch next to him, "You're dead on your feet, Toms. You look like you're gonna fall over any minute now."

For a moment, that familiar voice in the back of his mind chimed in, insisting it was another trap, demanding he come to his senses and leave before it was too late.

Another, much louder, voice told him to just let it go for once.

"Fine." Tommy finally grunted as he collapsed onto the couch, careful to keep a safe meter and a half of space between the two of them. "Can't promise I'm not going to complain about it though. I mean, who do they even think they are?"

Now. Maybe it wasn't the brightest idea to complain about the head of the Antarctic gang to someone who was *in* the Antarctic gang, but Tommy needed to talk to *someone* about it all. Everything was so confusing, so fragile, so much, that it was jumbling him up inside. He needed to let some of the thoughts out or everything would spill out over the seams.

Tommy's head flopped back against the headboard. "My jobs for the Feral boys, they don't follow me around. They don't second guess me, they don't hover--you know, my first job Sapnap and Karl set off *fireworks* when I left. Right there in the middle of East Side Square. Half a dozen guards were chasing them by the time they'd finished. When I came back George declared it a feast--they bought a roast off of the mid-ring shops. There was nobody fuckin' tailing me--they trusted me to do what I needed to get done. I only wish I'd get the same treatment in the Depths. I mean, is that so much to ask for? A little respect? They may not be as touchy-feely up here, and we may not be as close, but at least they give me that. You know what I mean?"

Tommy glanced over to his side, to Wilbur. The man was staring at him, his mind somewhere distant.

Tommy frowned. "Did you even listen to a word I just said?"

There was a long, intense pause where Wilbur just looked at him.

"Are you happy here, Tommy?" Wilbur asked finally, eyes keen, "Truly?"

Another pause, just a second of hesitation, but it didn't go unnoticed.

"I-I'm working on it." Tommy told him honestly.

"I am sorry, you know. About before." Wilbur whispered, just barely loud enough for Tommy to hear.

The boy shrugged, unable to meet his eyes. "It's okay, Will. I'm over it."

Another long, slow gaze from Wilbur. Tommy stared at his hands.

"Okay. Okay, Toms." He finally said, just soft enough for Tommy to hear, "It would be okay if you weren't, though."

For a while, the two of them just sat there in solemn, peaceful silence. The tiny gap between them felt more like a chasm, somehow.

"You okay, Toms?" Wilbur finally asked.

Tommy, honestly, had almost fallen asleep in the silence. "Mmm?"

"Sunshine?" Wilbur asked again.

"Don't--don't call me that, Will. I'm a big man." Tommy grumbled, though his voice had no real heat, "Don't need you babying me."

Wilbur just chuckled fondly. "Sure you are, you little gremlin. Sure."

"Wha--gremlin?" Tommy muttered, sending Wilbur a dirty look, "Look, just because you come over here and be all fucking clingy, Wilby, doesn't mean--"

Tommy's eyes widened. His mouth snapped shut. Wilbur stared at him.

"What did you just--did you just call me *Wilby*?" The most charming, genuine smile Tommy had ever seen broke through Wilbur's face, and the force of it was like being hit by a ray of sun, except a thousand times stronger.

Tommy scowled, shaking his head.

Wilbur just laughed, incredulous, amazed, "You--you just called me Wilby."

Tommy crossed his arms, looking away to hide how red his face was. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re going insane. Get help, Wilbur.”

“Are you—you’re *embarrassed*.” Wilbur pinched one of his cheeks and Tommy yelped, swatting his hand away, “Awww, that’s okay, Toms, Wilby’s here—”

He moved to pull Tommy into his arms and the boy squirmed away in a tangle of thrown elbows and kicks to Wilbur’s stomach.

“Get away you clingy bastard, I’ll fuckin, I’ll stab your eyes, I’ll electrocute you, I’ll slit your *throat*, you—” He screeched, and all the while Wilbur was tugging him closer, cooing, “Tommyyy, Toms, *Sunshine*, I got you gremlin, come *here*—”

In the end, Tommy didn’t stand a chance. Five minutes later, his hair was considerably more tousled and he was being crushed under the weight of Wilbur’s torso.

“Throw yourself off the top of the Walls.” Tommy huffed petulantly, trying to no avail to free his arms from underneath Wilbur’s body.

“What? But then we wouldn’t get to cuddle.” Wilbur wrapped an arm around Tommy in a half-hug and Tommy unconsciously curled closer.

“Die.” He muttered half-heartedly.

“Awww, darling, your first death threats.”

“Wilbur. Just.” Tommy finally gave up, slumping underneath him. He was too tired to struggle. “Ugh.”

With Wilbur laying over him like a blanket, the instant he stopped struggling, the weariness of the entire day, the entire *week*, hit him full force. Tommy’s eyes fluttered half shut. It had been a long day, and he really was exhausted...

“Are you tired?” Wilbur murmured a few moments later when he finally realized that Tommy had stopped wriggling, and Tommy made a soft, content sound. “Oh, Toms, let’s just move you...”

Wilbur sat the two of them up, leaning Tommy against the couch in a more comfortable position. He drew away, leaving to go grab a blanket to cover the boy with, and was stopped by two sets of fingers gripping onto the edge of his coat. With a soft sigh, the man sank back down into the couch, and Tommy sleepily nestled himself into the man’s sigh.

“You sleep so much more often now, Tommy. It’s worrying, I must say. Especially with those dark circles still under your eyes. You been having nightmares, sunshine?” Wilbur whispered into his hair, and Tommy leaned closer, clinging to his trenchcoat. “It’s okay. We’ll make sure you rest properly once you come back home. I’ll chase away all those nightmares for you.”

Tommy murmured out something soft and unintelligible, and Wilbur practically cooed at the sound, pulling him even closer, running a hand through his hair.

“Rest, sunshine.” The voice whispered, soft and warm and everything Tommy had never had, “Go to sleep.”

Tommy drifted away.

Something prodded him in the shoulder. Tommy groaned and rolled away, and the finger came back again, nudging his arm, his neck, his face.

And then he realized: somebody was *poking* at him.

Fast as lightning, his eyes still closed, Tommy swung, lashing out in a blind panic.

Somebody caught his fist.

Tommy's eyes snapped open.

"I made you some breakfast, Toms." Wilbur sang, his face not more than three inches away from Tommy's own, holding the boy's fist in one hand, a plate of eggs in the other.

Tommy, momentarily, wasn't entirely certain he was not hallucinating.

"Wilbur did *not* make you that breakfast, I just want to clarify." A voice grunted, and Tommy's eyes shot up to Techno, standing in the middle of the kitchen with a comically ruffled apron on and a pan in one hand, "Wilbur can't cook for shit. *I* made you some breakfast."

Tommy, still regaining his senses, just blinked. "But...Wilbur taught *me* how to cook."

Techno just stared at him, expression deadpan, eyebrows raised.

Tommy gasped. "*No.*"

His eyes flashed over to Wilbur. The man was avoiding his gaze.

If Tommy wasn't awake before, he certainly was now. The sting of betrayal would do that to you. He pushed himself off the couch, eyes flickering between the two of them with an accusation in them. "You said you loved my cooking!"

Wilbur winced. "I mean..."

"I lied." Techno deadpanned.

No. No way, Tommy absolutely refused to believe this.

"What--no, you're messing with me." Tommy spotted a flash of a green robe and locked in on it, his last hope, "Phil! Tell him he's wrong."

Phil just hid an amused smile behind his hand.

"You too?!"

This was betrayal. Absolute betrayal. Treachery. Duplicity. Deceit. Tommy would never recover.

Techno, oblivious to his inner pain, just handed him his plate of food and shrugged. "The only thing that you've made that was even remotely edible was cake. And that's only 'cause Phil was teaching you how to do that."

"I can't believe this." Tommy crossed his arms, flopping back down onto the couch, "I can't--you know what, that was the last time I bake for you fuckers."

Wilbur winced, voice soothing, "Tommy, sunshine--"

"Great." Techno interrupted, "That'll significantly decrease my chance of getting *poisoned*."

Tommy made a choked, indignant noise. "I'll show you getting poisoned, you *pretentious*--"

Techno, being the intelligent man that he was, chose that exact moment to leave, strolling toward the kitchen door as Tommy screeched in the background. “Well. I’m heading out.”

Wilbur glanced up from where he and Tommy had started play-fighting each other, “What, you’re actually going somewhere, Techno?”

“I may have, uh, started sparrin’ with that Sapnap guy.” Techno shrugged, carefully nonchalant.

Whatever facade he had been trying to put up, it wasn't working. Wilbur went still, eyes sparking with something both evil and gleeful, as he said slowly, so slowly, “Techno—are you...? Making friends?”

“We’re not friends.” Techno huffed in the same gruff tone as always, but his face was more red than usual, “He’s a skilled fighter.”

This was, clearly, not the correct response. Wilbur’s face lit up. “Oh, my gosh, you *are*! You’re making friends! I never thought I’d see the day.”

Techno glared at him. “Shut up Wilbur, the only people you ever talk to are Phil, Tommy, and the guys from that music shop, and Tommy is pretty on the line right now. Don’t pretend you’re some social butterfly or something.”

The words were harsh, but Wilbur was on a roll now. He wasn't even fazed.

“Introverted Mr. Technoblade, the Blade, the self-proclaimed Blood God of the Depths, is finally learning to talk to people? I don’t think I’ve ever been so proud.” The man taunted with the most shit-eating grin Tommy had ever seen.

“I’m leaving.” Techno grunted.

“They grow up so fast.” Phil stage-whispered into Tommy’s ear, and the boy fell into a fit of barely-muffled giggles.

Techno’s head shot over to the man with an accusing stare. “Phil, you’re supposed to be on my side!”

Phil just shrugged, looking infinitely amused.

“I can’t believe the Blade is going soft.” Tommy whispered (very loudly) back.

“Bruh. I’m getting targeted.” Technoblade huffed a sigh and stomped out the door.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tommy saw Phil nudge Wilbur in the shoulder. The man jolted, clearing his throat uncomfortably. “...Right, I’m just going to go watch him then. Never pass up an opportunity to make fun of Technoblade, that’s what I say. I’m gonna—”

Wilbur jerked his head towards the door and basically ran after Techno, with a single, meaningful parting glance at Phil.

Leaving the two of them there. Alone.

Subtle.

Tommy's gaze shot to Phil with a suspicious glare.

Sure enough, the man had an expression on his face like he was about to break it to him that his dog had just died or something. “Tommy, I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“What.” Tommy asked coldly, “What is it, Philza?”

"Mate—" Philza began, but Tommy's glare only got sharper and the man must have realized it was a lost cause to try and ease him into whatever conversation they were about to have, because he cut himself off and instead tried, "It's nothing bad."

No good conversation had ever been precluded by 'it's nothing bad.'

Tommy swallowed hard. "Phil. Phil, I swear if you ruin my mood right now I— I will cry."

Phil hesitated at that, his expression faltering. His fingers twitched in Tommy's direction, as if to comfort him somehow, and Tommy shrunk back from it. He ignored the flash of hurt that crossed Phil's face.

He should've known that good things never lasted. He hardened his heart, took a deep breath, and braced himself before he turned back to Phil with eyes like steel. "Stop stalling. Just tell me. What."

Phil sighed. "When we were trying to find you, I did a little bit of research on Theseus's identity. On you."

Tommy paled.

"Nothing too intense. I was mostly just looking for clues as to where you might've disappeared off too." Phil reassured, watching his reaction intently, "...whether you had any other families you could return to. All that."

There was something of an implication in the words, something Tommy didn't quite want to unpack—a question under the surface, hidden in the way he said *other* families.

"Okay." Tommy forced out, though his heart was jackhammering in his chest, "Cool. You did a little digging. Sounds like fun."

"It's usually not." Phil said, slowly, delicately, "It's usually pretty dull to do all the research, but this time...I found something interesting to say the least."

Tommy stayed silent. He couldn't know, surely? Thomas was buried, he was gone, he didn't even have a record, *surely*--

"I have to ask, mate. You know I do."

"I don't know what you're talking about." The words were stiff, clunky, coming out of his mouth. An obvious lie, but he just had to hope Phil wouldn't call him out on it.

"Should've expected you to be a downright cryptic little shit. You're just like Techno." Phil replied, his voice almost fond, before it dropped lower, more intense, "Toms, you don't exist. The digital records, any hint of a paper trail, all my contacts--they all go completely dark when they reach nine years ago. Even the citywide citizen database--I combed through it for days, mate, and there was no sign of you. Not a single facial match in thousands of boys with your height and age, I even tried variations of your name, Theodore, Tom, Thomas--"

Tommy choked on air. Phil's eyes lit up.

"Thomas, then." His head tilted, his eyes watching Tommy with an unnatural cleverness, "That's your name."

Tommy's breath caught in his throat and stuck there for a moment, and he choked on it as his world came crashing down around him. He couldn't know, he couldn't. If Phil found out, if *anyone* found out—but no, it wasn't possible, he didn't even *exist* anymore, how could—?

"Tommy. It's Tommy. Don't--don't call me--" He was panicking, he realized that much, but he couldn't seem to stop himself from falling deeper into that abyss, couldn't regain control of his lungs. All he could manage

was to gasp out a few choked words. "I'm no one. I'm nothing. Don't look for me again."

The clever light in Phil's eyes winked out, all that satisfaction, the analytic look—gone, replaced by something terribly gentle, as the man leaned closer and placed a solid, steadying hand on Tommy's forearm.

"Okay, Toms. Whatever you want. I didn't mean to upset you." Phil's words were just barely above a whisper, but it was enough to ground him, to make his head stop spinning.

As soon as the world had settled back into place Tommy yanked his hand away, stumbling back, stuttering. "It's—fine, Phil. It's fine. I'm fine."

Phil's brow furrowed, with clear concern and maybe even a hint of panic. He took another slow step closer, hands raised in the universal sign of *I mean no harm*. "Mate, like half of the words in that sentence were 'fine.'"

Tommy just nodded, stumbling away another step. "Yeah, no, I--I'm totally, this is fine--"

Okay, he was clearly not doing anything to help his case if the concerned glance Philza was sending his way was any hint, so Tommy did the one thing he could think left to do.

He turned tail and fled.

"What's your game here, *Wilbur*?" A voice hissed as he sped down the hallway, and Tommy froze in his tracks, "What do you want with him?"

Tommy took a step back, glancing around to find the noise coming through a crack in a nearby door, and stepped closer to peer through it.

Wilbur, in his infamous trench coat, his back to Tommy. Facing towards him, Sapnap, his eyes burning with fiery rage.

"Is this wise, Sapnap?" Wilbur asked, sounding bored, "Drop the knife. I'll only say it once."

Knife?

Tommy squinted and, sure enough, he could spot a glint of silver by Wilbur's throat, a blade pressed up against the skin. He leaned closer, his hand poised on the handle of his staff. Just in case he needed to step in. The last thing he needed was a gang war on his hands when these two idiots murdered each other.

Sapnap just growled, leaning closer to the man. "Answer the question. You want an errand boy? Find someone else. I won't have him be used as a personal punching bag for you sickos. Is that what you want? To use him? To hurt him?"

"*Never*." Wilbur snapped so vehemently, so aggressively, that even Sapnap inched away from him, and he was the one with the knife.

Still, he didn't back down. "People all over the Underground would pay millions to have the kid under their control. He's a good thief. The *best* thief."

"Yes, I'm beginning to understand that." Wilbur replied, calmer now, his voice incredibly fond.

"*Beginning?* Kid's a gods-damned *genius*. Picked up pyrotechnics in days, like nothing I've ever seen before. You're telling me you guys didn't see it from the start?" Sapnap scoffed, "You're bigger fools than I thought if you underestimate him."

Tommy was going to—was going to hug Sapnap or bake him a cake or some shit.

“*No, we don’t.*” Wilbur hissed, “I know full well what the kid is capable of. He’s the most clever, stubborn kid I’ve ever met.”

Was he dreaming, like, what the hell was happening here? Had he died and gone to heaven? Tommy leaned closer to the door.

“And you’re telling me you’re not going to take advantage of that?” Sapnap challenged.

Wilbur’s voice was like ice. “If you suggest one more time, that I will ever lay a hand on Tommy, I swear to *Prime—*”

“Fine, *fine*, sure whatever. You say you won’t touch him, but I know your type, and if I ever see that kid hurt...” The rest of the sentence was implied.

Wilbur huffed arrogantly. “As if you could take me.”

Even from outside of the door, Tommy could feel the air in the room grow tighter, more tense.

“The arson hasn’t fried my brain yet, I’m not dumb enough to fight you head on.” Sapnap told him, “There are other ways to kill. You’d be surprised how effective grenades are when someone isn’t paying attention.”

Tommy couldn’t quite see Wilbur’s face, but he could imagine the dark look in his eyes, when he said, “Was that a threat, Sapnap?”

Wisely, Sapnap chose not to respond.

He turned towards the door. “404 might not say it outright, but the kid’s grown on him too. He’s as much ours as he is yours.”

Sapnap yanked the door open with a grunt, but by then Tommy was long gone, something soft and warm and dangerous burning in his chest.

Tommy was dead. He knew that. He *accepted* that. There was no escaping it.

Ranboo was going to murder him.

They had decided on weekly visits when Tommy had found them their little apartment, situated at the intersection of two alleyways in a neighborhood where no one would ask too many questions. Half of it was for their wellbeing—Tommy had been giving them his pay from the Feral gang so they could pay for food and other survival needs—and half as a precaution: checking in to make sure everyone was okay, that nobody had been compromised, and, mostly, ensuring that Ranboo’s crown was still functional.

It was a scrappy thing, pieced together from spare bits of metal and electronics that Tubbo had salvaged, but embedded in the little silver crown was the only piece of technology that kept Ranboo’s mind, and by association, all of *them*, safe from Dream.

The weekly visits were important, and at that point it had been eleven days since Tommy had last made an appearance.

Yeah. He was done for.

“Bee boy! Ranboo? Where are you guys?” Tommy called into the alley, albeit hesitantly.

A door clicked open, Ranboo's head popping out, crown and all. Tommy braced himself, but the boy didn't look nearly as pissed as Tommy had thought he'd be. Maybe he was fine after all?

"Tommy. Hi." Ranboo greeted, glancing anxiously over his shoulder back into the safe house, "Uh, you should probably come and see this."

Tommy was too relieved for his own skin to argue. He approached the building, only pausing when he heard a thud from inside and—

"I am Queen Bee now." Tubbo's voice declared from inside the safe house (it was more a rickety shack than anything, but the three of them had an unspoken agreement that *safe house* was a way cooler term) that Tommy had found for the two of them, "I will take the shining city. My bees will sting everyone until they bow before me."

Tommy blinked. That..certainly hadn't been what he was expecting. The whole homicide thing was pretty much the norm for Tubbo, but taking down the entire city? Where did that come from? He'd been gone for a week for Prime's sake, how had things fallen apart so fast?

Tommy stepped into the safe house, and instantly knew he'd made a terrible mistake.

They really had made quite nice work of it--a ratty mattress in one corner, a work bench with various tools and electronics in another. That wasn't the problem. What really drew his eyes was that every single surface in the house--the shelves, the desk, the *floors*--was covered in drones or disassembled drone parts.

"Uh. Hey there, Tubbo." Tommy greeted, staring at it all, questioning what decisions he had made for his life to get to this.

Tubbo whirled toward the greeting, his face splitting into a wide, maniacal grin. "Tommy! Little bird, do you still want to fly? My bees will help you. They are strong enough to carry you now. You will soar above the world and rain down terror when I take the city."

Tommy stared at him for a second.

Then his head whipped over to look at Ranboo.

"He's been like this all week." Ranboo whispered to him, wringing his hands, "I don't really know how to tell him that three dozen drones won't 'take the city' so I've just been agreeing with him."

As if to demonstrate this point, Tubbo noticed Ranboo with a start and turned to face him instead, gesturing wildly at his collection of drones. "Boo! I'm gonna make the streets run red! The city is mine."

"MmmmHMMMM." Ranboo agreed a little too loudly. Tubbo didn't seem to notice his discomfort, just whooping at his agreement and turning back to his work.

Ranboo spun to Tommy, eyes desperate. "Help. Me. Please."

Tommy looked at Tubbo, furiously meddling with a new drone. And then he looked at Ranboo, fidgeting anxiously with his hands. And then back at Tubbo. Ranboo. Back again.

He sunk his head into his hands.

Precisely forty seven seconds later, when Tommy had finally mentally prepared himself to deal with all of *this*, he looked up and turned back to Tubbo. "Three *dozen*? Tubbo, I thought we agreed to stop hijacking the patrol drones? You know?? That whole 'staying under the radar' thing?"

Tubbo grabbed a power tool—who the fuck had given him access to *power tools*?— off his workbench and turned back to the drone as he tugged his goggles down over his eyes. "No need. I will hack it."

What--what had possessed him to think that they were his best options of making it on his own?

"Hack it--Tubbo, it's an *expression*." Tommy replied, clearly exasperated.

Tubbo set down his tool, turning to him with a pout. "Boo said it was a great idea."

He did *what*?" Tommy's head whipped back to the other kid again, "Ranboo, what the fuck."

"I didn't know what to do, Tom." Ranboo whispered, "He's terrifying. You can't expect me to--to tell him no?"

Tommy threw his hands into the air. "Oh my fuckin--no, you know what, this one's on me. I shouldn't have left the mental kid with someone who can't ever say no to anyone."

He pointed at Ranboo in frustration, "You have the moral backbone of a chocolate eclair."

Ranboo nodded aggressively. "You're totally right. Of course. Chocolate eclair? That's, uh, totally me. Yep."

"Oh my Prime." He'd partnered himself up with idiots.

"Sorry." Ranboo instantly apologized, and he looked so upset that Tommy felt his anger die down and be replaced by guilt.

"Ughhhhh." Tommy groaned, he *hated* feeling guilty, "It's okay, Ranboo. It's okay. I shouldn't have said that."

Ranboo just shook his head, on the verge of tears, "No, Dream always told me I was just a pawn, and all I'm doing is just--"

And if that didn't make Tommy feel like shit, then nothing would. Being compared to Dream, even if it was unintentional... Tommy felt the guilt literally consume him, knew he had to fix this immediately, and put a gentle hand on Ranboo's shoulder.

"None of that. Don't talk about him, Boo. It'll take some time, but you'll get better. Don't listen to whatever he said." Tommy tapped Ranboo's crown with a comforting grin, "Chin up, king. Your crown is falling."

"Thanks, Tommy." Ranboo said with a soft smile, before his expression shifted into something sterner, more sure of himself. "Take a walk with me outside."

Oh no. Shit. He'd thought he'd gotten off the hook. Dammit.

"I mean, I really don't think--" Tommy started anxiously.

"Now."

Tommy followed the boy outside.

When they were out of earshot of Tubbo, Ranboo crossed his arms over his chest and frowned at Tommy in an *I'm not mad, I'm disappointed* sort of way. "You've been ignoring my messages."

Tommy chuckled uncomfortably, running his hand over the back of his neck, "Yeah...sorry about that. I was busy."

That, evidently, was not the answer Ranboo was looking for.

"Busy?? Busy!" He shrieked, "You haven't responded for four days, Tommy. Tubbo was about to send out his *horde*."

“The horde?” Tubbo’s head peeked out of the house curiously, “We talking about Bird Boy being bad?”

So Tubbo was in on this whole lecture too. Just great.

“Four days! Four. You know how hard it is to keep Tubbo in check without emotional support?” Tommy winced, because he totally did; it had taken an entire week for Tubbo to piece together the signal blocker in Ranboo’s crown, a week where Ranboo had needed to stay in a separate location just in case Dream took control—a week where Tommy had been the sole supervisor of Tubbo. In the span of just those six days, Tubbo had managed to steal four separate bombs (where did he even get them from?? Tommy had no clue. Tubbo just sort of showed up with them), bite at least seven different guards (Why. Just. *Why*), and build two enhanced drones that could shoot a man from two hundred feet away (Tubbo had demonstrated.)

So Tommy sort of understood why Ranboo was so on edge. The boy was pacing around the safe house with his hands on his hips, still scolding him. “You said you would update us on the gang and you didn’t say anything at all, and I thought—I was worried.”

“I’m sorry, really.” Tommy replied, and actually meant it, “Things have been, uh...interesting.”

Ranboo gave him a look, and Tommy raised his hands defensively. “Not bad, really! I just, I didn’t want to get you guys all mixed up in it, and—”

Something creeping and petrifying and unnerving washed over his skin, flooded through his veins. Every hair on the back of his neck stood up. Tommy froze.

Something was wrong. It was there in the tingle in his head, the tenseness of his muscles, the too-quiet sounds of the street. There were eyes on them. He could feel them burning underneath his skin.

“--you can’t just disappear, we’re here for you Tommy, surely you know that by now, and we’ll help out with—” Ranboo was still scolding him in the background of it all, and with the uneasy feeling lurking over him and the eerily silent street...it was just too much, too much to handle, he needed to be able to *focus*, but Ranboo just kept talking--

“Shut up.” Tommy snapped, his eyes scanning the alleyway, and he physically *felt* as Ranboo’s entire frame shrunk in on itself.

“I—” Ranboo squeaked, looking scared and a little hurt, “What—sorry, I—?”

“Ranboo. Someone is—get inside. Now.” He snapped, and Ranboo nodded rapidly, scurrying inside their house without question, “Tubbo. You too. Ready your bees.”

“Ready the bees?” Tubbo asked, a little too eager, and when Tommy gave him a grim nod his face split into something excited and inhuman. Like a wolf before the hunt.

He sprinted back into the house, slamming the door shut behind him, and almost instantly Tommy could hear the hum of the drones starting up, one by one.

Then it was just Tommy. Alone.

“Who’s out there?” Tommy hissed into the empty street, “Come out now and maybe I won’t snap your neck.”

There was no response, but that sick, uneasy feeling remained. *Someone* was out there.

And, really, there was only one person Tommy could think of that would go through all that trouble. Only one person that would stalk them like this, who was searching for both him and Ranboo.

Slowly, silently, Tommy expanded his staff and began moving towards the noise.

“Dream? I swear to Prime you sick bastard, if you’re here for Ranboo you better back the fuck off. It’s me you want? Then fine, but you leave him out of this.” Tommy threatened, his voice low and dangerous, “I won’t let you hurt him anymore. I won’t let you hurt *us*, anymore.”

Another slow step down the alleyway. His eyes scanned the shadows, searching for movement.

“You remember last Prime’s day, Dream? How you didn’t show up to collect your payment and then beat me half to death a week later for missing a payoff? You remember what you did to me?” Tommy scoffed, his grip tightening on his staff, “Then again, probably not. You never did. That’s okay, I can remind you: three broken ribs, a fractured femur, and a concussion. It coming back to you yet?”

No answer. Of course. He should have known he’d have to track the bastard down. So be it, then. He’d take him down by force.

His staff crackled violently in the palm of his hand. “I am going to drag you out of whatever hole you are hiding in and do a hundred times worse to you, you spineless, cowardly, corrupted fu—”

In the end, Tommy didn't need to hunt down the intruder. They stepped out all on their own.

Wilbur, in all of his brooding glory, looking spectacularly pissed.

“Who the *hell* is Dream?”

Chapter End Notes

sorry this chapter was very late :)) my goal is to have up to chapter 35 done by my birthday so more is soon to come.

subscribe to me on youtube! i played security breach and im putting out a vid within the next week

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thank you for the wonderful comments and kudos as always <33

Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Wilbur faces the consequences of his actions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

For a second, Tommy just blinked.

That hadn't been what he was expecting. Not at all.

The staff drooped in his grip. The tension in his shoulders relaxed, just a bit. "Wilbur?? Why the fuck are you—"

And then he remembered. The noise. The tingle on the back of his neck. He was still being watched. He still needed to find Dream. Tommy huffed, turning away, dismissive. He didn't have time for this. "Nevermind. I'm dealing with something right now, so, kindly, fuck off."

He wasn't too locked in on scanning the alleyway to miss the disgruntled noise that left Wilbur at that. Tommy supposed he wasn't exactly used to being ignored, but this time he'd just have to fucking *deal*.

"Tommy—" Wilbur tried again, voice painted in something that might have been bloodlust.

Tommy barely held back an exasperated sigh. Prime, couldn't he just zip it? He was sort of dealing with something here, and the fact that Wilbur had chosen *now* of all times to randomly show up from nowhere and start bothering him was really making the whole 'hunting down and murdering Dream' thing a little difficult.

Faintly, Tommy realized Wilbur was still standing there, staring at him like he would burn down the world for him, like he would make the streets run red if he kept dodging the question. In short, the man looked incredibly pissed

Screw that, a *lot* difficult.

Wilbur took another tense step towards him. Like a string about to snap, a finger on the trigger. His voice was low, dangerous. Urgent. " *Tommy*. Who th—"

Tommy interrupted him with a hiss, a low exhalation of air, a warning. "Shut. The. Fuck. Up. I am in the middle of—"

The puzzle pieces clicked together. The feeling of being watched. Wilbur appearing out of nowhere. Phil following him, two days earlier. *Techno* following him, before that.

Dream wasn't there at all. He never had been.

Tommy's jaw went slack and then tense again all within half a second. His staff slipped from his fingers. It clattered noisily against the ground. For a moment he just stood there. Taking it all in, simmering with disbelief, letting it sink under his skin and then boil back up to the surface as his expression shifted from wide-eyed shock to something raw, vulnerable.

An instant later and it was gone, something far sharper in its stead.

Tommy spun on him. Icy outrage flooded his features. “Holy shit. Holy shit. *You?* One of you *imbeciles* followed me *again?*”

Wilbur didn't even have the decency to look guilty, his hands shoved into his pockets, still staring at Tommy like *Wilbur* was the one who had been played somehow. Like he was missing a piece of the puzzle and *hated* it, like him being here wasn't a bloody knife in the back of the tenuous trust Tommy had built in him.

Tommy had at least hoped for some shred of shame. An understanding of what he'd just decimated between them.

But there was nothing. Wilbur didn't understand, and, deep down, Tommy wondered if maybe he *couldn't* understand, because surely Wilbur had never had to deal with the doubt, the whispers, the second-guessing of his skills, constantly wondering if every day was his last – if today would be the day that his luck caught up to him, if he'd end up another forgotten corpse, if anyone would even notice that he was dead. Wilbur didn't understand that. Tommy had tried and *tried* to explain it to them, but of course none of them would ever get it. Because he was Wilbur. The Siren of the Depths. Nobody *dared* speculate on his talents.

But as Tommy watched him, as Wilbur's entire pupils went dark, near black, Tommy realized two things for certain.

Wilbur was one of the closest things Tommy had to a friend in ten years, and Wilbur still didn't understand. The realization echoed through his frame, rattled down to his bones. He wasn't quite sure to handle it, so Tommy just stood there. Stared. How was he supposed to cope with that? How was he supposed to rationalize? That he was so close to having this perfect, impossible thing for himself for the first time in forever, he was *so close*, and it was still just out of his reach.

If only they could understand. If only he could make them understand.

But he had tried. He had tried so, *so* much.

Wilbur frowned, eyes piercing through him, expression murderous. “You didn't answer my question. *Who is Dream?*”

This? This was the hill he was going to die on? After he had, what? Tracked Tommy down? Followed him, again, just like Techno and Phil, even after their whole talk the day before? Even after Tommy had finally thought he was getting through to them, making some headway, after everything, and *still*. Here they were again, on opposite sides of the alleyway, staring each other down. Here they were again.

Maybe it was just too late for them.

“Oh my Prime—I am...I am so done with this.” Tommy snapped, turning to go back to the safe house. Excuse him, but if there weren't any *real* threats, he'd like to spend some time with his partners. “Wilbur. Get. *Out.*”

Wilbur scoffed, sounding entirely unimpressed, “Tommy, I am not going to leave until you tell me—”

“Get the fuck out of here, before I do something you'll regret.” Tommy snapped, and Wilbur jerked back like Tommy had physically slapped him, like he was surprised at the venom behind the words.

It only took a moment for the fire in his eyes to return, for the shakiness to disappear. “I'm not leaving. Not anytime soon, and especially not until—”

You know what? Tommy thought, So be it.

He wanted to stay? He wanted to ignore his wishes *again?* Fine.

“Tubbo!” Tommy shouted, staring at Wilbur, “You have those bees ready to go, big man?”

The reaction was immediate. A sideways glance showed Tubbo's head poking out of the safe house, painted in a manic grin.

“The horde. I get to use the horde?!” The pure, audible glee at the prospect of a drone bloodbath was more than a little concerning, but Tommy was too upset and too otherwise preoccupied to care.

His dead eyed stare never left Wilbur, who was looking a little bit more uncertain than a second earlier. Tommy bared his teeth. “Oh, by all means, *please*.”

Tubbo disappeared back into the safehouse. From within, a faint buzzing began, building up bit by bit. Wilbur's eyes flickered to the door of the safe house. Just once, just for an instant, but Tommy latched onto that uncertainty like a bloodhound. The buzzing crescendoed, like an engine revving up

“By the sounds of it, you have about ten seconds before the patrol drones we have stashed start to fire up.” Tommy remarked with a tight grin, forced nonchalance, “I would start running.”

The first drone swooped out of the house, zipping forward through the air with a sharp, menacing buzz, and Tommy's right arm shot upwards from his side—fingers splayed, elbow bent, eyes still locked on Wilbur. The drone paused to a stop just over his shoulder, hovering there as if waiting for his signal. Another followed, and then another, until there were half a dozen of the robots floating at his side.

Wilbur laughed, sharp and biting, but it sounded forced even to Tommy's ears. “You're not seriously going to unleash a few hacked drones and expect me to run away, are you?”

“Oh, Wilbur. Not just a few. Didn't you hear Tubbo? A *horde*.” Tommy told him, and took great satisfaction in the way Wilbur seemed to pale at the words. “It's getting mighty loud, Will. I wasn't kidding when I said to start running.”

Another drone swooped out of the house. The buzzing got louder.

A slow, gathering wind began to drift through the alleyway, kicking up trash and rubble, splaying Tommy's hair across his face, sending his cloak rippling behind him.

Wilbur took a hesitant step back. Something nervous flashed across his face. “Tommy—”

The wind picked up, the buzzing so loud now that the entire alleyway seemed to thrum with the vibrations.

“See you back at the base, Wilbur!” Tommy called over the roar, “*If* you can make it there in one piece.”

His head tilted ever so slightly toward the safe house. His eyes stayed locked on Wilbur. “Tubbo!”

The trickle of drones floating out from the house had become a steady flow. The pebbles on the ground began to shake. Tommy saw the instant it dawned on his face--just how dead serious he was. This wasn't just another game of bluffs. He was done fooling, letting them push him to and fro, letting them bat him around as if he was a feral cat who had been beaten into submission.

But this was it. The last straw. The needle that broke the camel's back. No more. No *fucking* more.

It was time to bring the claws out.

Wilbur's lips moved, his eyes widened, but Tommy couldn't hear a word over the cacophony, and he didn't make any effort to move closer. He didn't want to anyway. He didn't care. The wave of drones crested, and with it the rage bubbling up inside him—Tommy let the animal smile drop, the victorious facade fade away, leaving only the brittle, raw hurt remaining in his face. The truth.

“Go!” Tommy screamed. Wind whipped around him. Blurs of gray hovered in his peripheral vision, pincers out, at the ready. “Go!”

Wilbur took a stumbling step back, then another, but it wasn’t enough, it wasn’t *enough*, because he was still hesitating—still looking at Tommy with those wide, hurt eyes like he was the one who had been betrayed, like he might still be able to convince Tommy to stand down. Like *this* was somehow still salvageable.

And it wasn’t enough for him. Tommy wanted *blood*.

“I said—” Tommy shrieked, throwing his arm downward, “GO!”

The tidal wave crashed forward around him.

And with one last desperate, searching glance over his shoulder, Wilbur went.

The mood was, admittedly, sort of ruined after that.

Tommy tried to stay cheery, really he did, but it was kind of hard to put up a happy front with the barely restrained rage bubbling up inside him, just below the surface. He caught himself snapping when Ranboo was a little too apologetic, glaring blankly at the ground in the few moments of silence in the conversation. One of the drones crawling around the room bumped into the back of his leg at one point—Tommy had to grit his teeth and dig his nails into his palms just to stop himself from chucking the thing against the wall, and that was when he knew it was time to go. To deal with this mess, before he hurt anyone else.

He didn't want to, but eventually Tommy needed to go back. If not to end this unfinished business once and for all, at least to grab his belongings and make a quick escape. So after another hour of murmuring with Ranboo, watching Tubbo fiddle with more technology, Tommy gave them his stash of Prime cards to tide them over, grabbed his staff from where it rested against the door, threw his cloak over his shoulders, and began the trek back to the base across the rooftops.

He didn’t waste any time taking off his heisting gear when he arrived—he just marched through the base like a man on a mission, checking rooms as he went.

It was time to end this. No matter what, no matter the cost, he was so fucking tired of going through this argument again and again. For better or for worse, it was time that he dealt with this fucking—

“Tommy!” Sapnap called as he passed the pyro lab, and Tommy’s determined strides stuttered as the man pulled his goggles back from his eyes. “How were your frie—”

No. No distractions. No stalling. He had to handle this now.

“Sorry. No time.” Tommy snapped back. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sapnap shrug and turn back to his work—Tommy just charged on.

The armory was empty, the training room desolate except for George and Karl locked in a spar, the storage rooms and their guest rooms eerily quiet, Tommy peeked through the door of the kitchen and—

There were the three of them, huddled together in a corner of the kitchen, whispering just a little too low for him to hear.

Tommy slammed the door open.

“You.” Tommy snarled, “Get out of my base.”

Three pairs of eyes snapped to meet his.

Wilbur, Tommy noted with satisfaction, was looking far more unkempt than usual. His hair was in a state of total disarray, there were a few new tears in his trenchcoat, and, most noticeably, there was a long, precise gash running across his cheek and over the bridge of his nose, deep enough to scar, still dripping blood. Phil was only minutely better—his hair was so frazzled Tommy could only assume he had been running his hands through it almost continuously, and there were stress lines pinching the corner of his eyes.

Techno was the only one who looked even relatively composed, his pink hair braided, his eyes unreadable.

Wilbur stepped forward with a scowl, his lips parting to reply—at least until Phil wisely intervened, putting out a hand in front of the man, signaling him to back down.

“Now, Tommy.” Phil said with a hand out towards Tommy, as if trying to calm a skittish animal, “I understand you’re upset, but—”

Out of the corner of his eye, Techno’s gaze shot to Phil, his eyebrows raised with incredulity—and then slowly, subtly, the man took a single step away from the three of them, as if the entire conversation was a bomb that might explode at any given moment.

To be fair, he wasn’t exactly wrong.

“Upset.” Tommy scoffed, his nose wrinkling, his eyes on fire, “You think I’m *upset*? Oh, we’re *far* past that.”

And then Tommy pulled out his staff.

Chapter End Notes

sorry for the delay and short chapter, been going through a bit of a writers block!

thanks so much for reading, hope you enjoyed <333 more soon to come

in other news i started some other AUs check them out!

(you have to kudos its my birthday)

Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

consequences

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil was, above all things, a diplomat.

Strange, considering he was also a notoriously ruthless criminal with more than a little blood on his hands, but it was a quirk Tommy had noticed time and time again during his stay in the Depths. Techno and Wilbur disagreed on which arms dealer to give business to? Phil would make a list of pros and cons of both and sit everyone down for a discussion. Argument over who would do the dishes (look, Tommy was basically kidnapped, okay? No fucking way he was *cleaning* for his captors)? Phil would step in and make a chore calendar. Wilbur was accusing everyone of stealing his sweaters even though *nobody wanted his sweaters*, and maybe you just *lost* them dude, don't go around blaming everyone else, why the hell would anyone want those things? Phil was the one who methodically searched through the base until he found the ugly, yellow thing under a couch cushion.

Most people would undoubtedly look at him and see a monster—the blood on his hands, the way he had threatened George, the ruthless killing of the guards, the wings of literal *knives*—but Tommy knew, more than anything, Phil was just...protective. Fierce, but protective. He had a strict moral code, and a good, strategic head on his shoulders, and he wasn't so naive as to think he could always get his way without a little force to back it up—or, to put it in a different way, Phil was probably the kindest one out of the four of them, but there were just some things he couldn't compromise on. His gang, his family, was one of them. Prime help anyone who stepped in between him and those he held dear, but other than that the guy was a total softie.

More than that even, when it really boiled down to it, he was the mediator. The rock to temper the storm. Where Wilbur was fire, and Techno was ice, he was the voice of reason.

So when Phil's eyes narrowed on the crackling staff in his hand, Tommy knew it was only a matter of time before he took matters into his own hands and attempted to quell the hurricane brewing between them, instead of just letting the argument finally boil over and run its natural course. Sure enough, it wasn't a second later when Phil took a step—a step *closer*. Edging in front of Wilbur as if he could shield Tommy from the glare painting the man's face, his hand still outstretched in a placating gesture.

“Again, Tommy, I'm well aware you're not exactly pleased with Wilbur here.” Phil enunciated each word slowly, carefully, as if any sudden noises might set him off. “We talked about this before, Toms. He was just doing what I asked.”

From the corner of his eye, Tommy saw Techno wince.

It didn't do anything to quell the molten fire scorching its way up his throat. It didn't do anything to stop Tommy's cheeks from heating into an angry scarlet, or his nails from digging into his palms, or his eyes from lighting up like magma as, for just a split second, he tried to hold back the fire burning on the tip of his tongue, waiting to be released.

And then Tommy looked, really *looked*, at Phil: at the soothing hand and unintentional condescension and realized he wasn't letting himself be placated out of this argument again. It needed to happen, whether Phil wanted it or not, and Tommy was tired of holding back for the sake of *diplomacy*.

See the problem between him and the gang, at the very root of it, was a lack of understanding. They didn't get it--his drive, his motivation. They couldn't comprehend his life, his reasons for doing what he did, his work, and so they just assumed: he was wrong, they knew better, they could help him. So many times, this talk had begun--they spoke, and he snapped, and he started to tell them off but stopped himself for the sake of keeping the peace. Well, no more. They didn't understand, and they never would if he kept holding back.

The fire in his throat surged and bloomed, and Tommy finally let it take hold.

"No. *You* talked. Not *we*. You talked, and I disagreed, and you didn't listen." Tommy spat, taking an aggressive step closer, waving his staff wildly, "And you--you think that makes this better somehow? You think because you *told* him to follow me, I'm just going to fucking drop it?"

Phil's expression dropped from soft and soothing to something far more stern at the words. As if even Mr. Congeniality himself was struggling to keep a leash on his frustration.

There was a bit of cruel satisfaction in that. Riling up Phil.

The calming hand wavered just a bit. "Now Tommy, I'm trying to have a calm conversation with you here, and I really don't appreciate you using this sort of attitude on me. Why can't you just talk things out nicely for *once*?"

Techno looked like he was regretting being born. He seemed to be trying to distance himself from the entire conversation as far as physically possible without just straight up and leaving the room. He might have been socially awkward, but the man wasn't stupid. He was looking at Tommy like he was seconds away from stabbing someone through the neck.

To be fair, he wasn't exactly wrong. Tommy was *boiling*.

"Yeah, well why should I care what you appreciate, huh? I don't *appreciate* you guys ignoring my choices! That's never fucking mattered to *you*, has it?" He snapped, stabbing the staff in Wilbur's direction, "At every single turn you just have to make the worst possible decision. The worst! You guys literally *suck*! I asked for one thing, *one thing*, and that was for you guys to let me do my work, but no. Nooooo. We just *have* to follow Tommy for every single fucking outing, even after we pretend like we understand why he's upset and act like we care about him--" At some point, Tommy's eyes had unconsciously locked on Wilbur, bored under his skin, "--and treat him like he's one of us and make him *promises* that we clearly don't intend to--" Tommy's voice broke, and he choked back a strangled sob into something less broken as his gaze turned to the ground.

The betrayal was still too fresh.

Out of the corner of his eye, Phil's expression softened minutely. Wilbur was too caught up in it all to even notice. He stepped forward, pushing around Phil to confront Tommy himself.

"So, let me get this straight." He hissed, and the venom painting his voice was so potent that even in his haze of rage Tommy couldn't help but shrink back. "You don't want us to accompany you for your work by your side, like any *normal* human, you don't want us to watch your back or keep an eye out for you from the background--what the fuck *do* you want, Tommy?"

Dear Prime, was he dense? Why was this so hard for them to understand? Tommy took another step closer to him, snapping, "For you not to keep any fucking tabs on me at all, asshole!"

Wilbur threw his hands in the air. Another step closer. They were nearly nose to nose now, Phil just behind him, edged out despite his attempt to mediate. Techno still lingered against the wall of the room. “Not happening!”

Tommy’s face twisted. Something clawing and hopeless bloomed in his chest. Wilbur *still* didn’t understand. Okay, fine. Fine. Conviction wasn’t enough to convince him, clearly. Surely, he’d listen to the facts of the situation.

He was aiming for calm and collected, but his voice came out almost desperate. “Well that’s the entire problem, then! Why can’t you just trust me to handle things by myself. I’m responsible enough, aren’t I? I-- you have to understand, I’m a very independent person, and that’s the way I like it. I was doing this by myself for nine years before you guys came along, Prime knows I have enough experience. I’ve handled jobs beyond your imaginations, so why can’t you just *let me work*. I don’t need you. I don’t want you. My job, that’s all I want, *please Wilbur*, just let me do my work. You don’t understand, and you never fucking listen to me, all I want is for you to just *listen*, and I don’t understand why you never fucking listen--”

And as if on cue, Wilbur interrupted, his voice rising again, pressing his pointer finger and thumb to the bridge of his nose in a distinctly annoyed way. “Oh my Prime, I don’t know how many times I have to say this to get it through your thick, fucking sk--”

“Wilbur.” A voice cut in sharply. A hand shot out in front of the man and he froze mid-shout. Phil always was the diplomat. Tommy wasn’t sure it would be enough to save them this time. Still the man’s effort was admirable. He edged closer, all the traces of frustration gone, his voice careful and delicate. “Because we care about you. Because we don’t want to see you hurt, or dead, or wake up to find you missing from your room with no clue where you’ve disappeared to. That’s all, mate.”

For a moment, the room went quiet. The tiniest bit of hope entered Wilbur’s eyes, like he thought Phil might have patched everything over yet again.

Tommy’s heart sank. His hand was trembling so badly that he thought his staff might slip from his grip and clatter to the ground.

“So you don’t trust me.” Tommy deadpanned.

Phil slapped his hand over his face. Wilbur audibly groaned.

“Holy fucking— *No !*” Wilbur snapped, the hope gone from his gaze, the contempt back in its stead. “That’s not what we’re saying. Phil, did I black out for a minute and fucking say that?”

Phil didn’t respond. He looked a little lost, like he hadn’t expected things to go this way. To crash and burn so incredibly quickly. In some twisted, vindictive way, Tommy was glad he had disappointed him. He’d done it for everyone else in his miserable fucking life, might as well.

Tommy was fast to retort. “But that’s what you mean, isn’t it? Same thing. You go out and do your own jobs, same as Techno.” The man, still standing as far away as possible and staring impassively, raised his hands as if to say *hey, don’t bring me into this*.

It was clear there wasn’t going to be any help from *him* then. Tommy whirled back toward Wilbur. “So why am I the outlier? I want to heist, let me fucking heist. It’s not that hard! I’m just some random-ass thief you hired less than a year ago. You didn’t even know who I was for the first like three months of that! Even after I came to your base, I was only there for a few months. You say you want to protect me? What gives you the right? I was on my own for nine years. Nine fucking years. You weren’t ever there to protect me then.”

Tommy’s voice was awfully...bitter, almost, though he had no clue why. Bitterness implied he was upset about his life in East Side. And he wasn’t. He was fine there.

Something indiscernible flashed across Wilbur's face. A realization of sorts. His gaze softened. It just made Tommy angrier. Wilbur didn't get to be upset, or soft, or confused. He was in the wrong here. Him. He didn't get to be upset.

"So what gives you the right now? Why do you get to make that sort of claim? Huh?" Tommy's voice broke and he took a second to steady it, to push his chin up and straighten his back, "I've been fine on my own for all this time, and I'd be just as fine without you. I don't—I don't need you guys to make some sort of a name for myself. Why would I need you guys now? You were never there before."

Wilbur took another step closer, his expression soft but still firm, still unrelenting. "But we are now. I can—we'd take care of you, Toms. Why do you even need to work? Please, Tommy, just—"

It felt like something was breaking and burning in him all at once—Wilbur was offering everything he'd ever wanted for the last decade, a place of his own, a place where he'd be cared for. And it still wasn't enough. He couldn't give up on Theseus, not now. Not when he was so close to finally cementing his claim as Theseus, once and for all.

Tommy's arm shot out—his staff slammed against the wall with a sharp *crack*, and a spider web of fissures spread through the drywall. "You're still not listening to me! I don't want to stop working, I don't *want* to just sit around and let the world go on without me, okay? I'd be nothing, useless, I can't just give up everything, not even for you."

He'd been burned before. Maybe it would take days, or weeks, or months, but eventually they would get tired of him, of how incredibly useless he was, and then he'd be back where he started all those years ago. He'd have given it all up for nothing.

"Theseus—" Technoblade, who had been actively avoiding interjecting, finally stepped forward with a small frown at the words.

Tommy was tired of getting cut off. "Shut the fuck up, Techno. No one fucking cares about your opini—"

Techno scoffed, crossing his arms. "I was *going* to agree with you."

Every jaw in the room dropped.

Phil's head snapped over to the man with an incredulous, "Techno?"

Tommy blinked, and then— "I take everything back. Shut up and listen to Techno."

The man sighed, pushing himself off the wall he'd been leaning against with a casual shrug. "Wilbur, don't give me that face. Look, all I'm sayin' is maybe we should hear him out. I mean, I've heard enough about Wilbur as a teen to know he wasn't much different from the kid."

Oh? So Wilbur had been giving him—giving him all this *shit*, and he'd been exactly the same way? Fucking hypocrite. Tommy's simmering gaze shot to the man, waiting for his explanation expectantly. Wilbur's lips parted for an indignant retort.

Techno raised a smug eyebrow. "You gonna disagree with me? Phil's got photo albums."

Wilbur's mouth snapped shut.

Techno continued. "And while I certainly agree that there needs to be a certain level of...oversight, isn't his stubbornness the very reason we all saw such...promise in him in the first place? We can't fault Theseus for having a purpose."

A little glimmer of sunlight peeked through the storm clouds raging in Tommy's mind. He turned to see Wilbur and Phil's response, biting his lip with barely restrained hope.

“A purpose? He hasn’t said a single thing about a *purpose* to all this.” Wilbur snorted, brushing it off as if Tommy wasn’t standing right there, and the hope withered in his chest, “Kid just wants to make a quick buck. We’d give him anything he wanted, the entire world, and he won’t take it so he can—”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about. You have no idea what’s at stake for me. You never have. You’ve never even *asked*.” Tommy seethed, gritting his teeth. His body shook—he wasn’t sure with what. Rage? Desperation?

“Oh, I don’t? Choose then!” Wilbur snapped, “Choose! You said it, we made a deal. One week, Tommy. You said one week, and it’s been nearly that, so make your choice. We’d give you everything Tommy, everything. All you have to do is reach out and take it. Come back with us. Back to the Depths.”

Tommy’s sucked in a sharp, uneven breath. “At every fucking turn you’ve doubted me, you’ve underestimated me, you’ve ridiculed me...Do you have any clue what it took to get this far? Do you have any clue what I’ve sacrificed? I can’t just— *Wilbur* —”

He didn't know how to explain it to them, the enormity of what he was feeling. He didn't know how to make them understand that he was tearing himself apart. It was a battle being waged in his chest, pulling him towards two separate destinies. How could he choose? How could they *expect* him to choose? He didn’t want a team. Maybe once, long ago, when he was a child full of unbridled spirit and hopes and dreams he had thought it was possible. Ten years in Eastside had hammered that out of him.

He'd been fighting for his claim as Theseus for *years*. He couldn't give that up, not even for them, and yet— Tommy’s eyes began to burn.

“You—you don’t get to do this to me. You don’t get to come in here and give me this sort of ultimatum, to dangle this in front of me—I can’t—you know I can’t—all I’ve ever wanted was for you to—” Tommy’s voice broke, his body began to shake with the sheer hopelessness pounding through his system, “You *lied* to me, and I can’t, you know I can’t just stop, I need to prove—I need to show everyone that I can—I’m not nothing, and—”

He cut himself off with a broken noise, and—that was it. His knees buckled underneath him, and Tommy just sat on the floor gasping in air.

Techno saw it first—he stumbled back a step, his expression shaken. Wilbur was the next: he turned towards the boy when he heard the choked up sound of him going silent.

“...Tommy? What are you—” Wilbur spotted him, and his lips parted, “Oh. Tommy—”

Phil shattered the moment with a sudden, strangled sound. He sounded as if someone had taken a dagger and gutted him. Like they’d thrown his heart and it’d fragmented against the floor.

That was when Tommy realized he’d never looked like this in front of them. So broken, near tears. He pushed himself back up to his feet, took a shaky step back. Towards the door. Then another. He’d revealed too much, let down his guard again. He—he needed to escape this before they used it against him, before they convinced him...

“Wait—wait, Tommy, Toms—” Wilbur sounded panicked, desperate, and more than a little lost. Like he wasn’t quite sure what was happening or how to handle it.

Tommy hesitated, and for just a second, the room was unified in horrified silence, save for the sound of Tommy’s panicked breaths. The three of them on one side of the room, and him on the other, and nobody making a move towards the other. As if there was a chasm between the two sides.

Or maybe it had always been there. Maybe it had simply grown too wide to cross this time.

Maybe this was where they called it quits. The three of them were just too different, and some things couldn't be forgiven, even if he wanted to.

"I'm sorry." Wilbur blurted out suddenly. There was something of a revelation in his eyes.

It was too late.

Tommy took another step back. Wilbur's face fell.

"*Tommy.*" He said, and it was almost desperate.

He stepped towards Tommy, one hand outstretched as if to cup his face, and the boy flinched back violently.

Wilbur's expression was nothing short of devastated. "I would *never* —"

He cut himself off with a choked noise, like the thought itself was too painful to voice. He took another step and Techno jolted into action, grabbing Wilbur's wrist, holding him back. "Will, let him go, he needs—"

But Tommy wasn't listening anymore. He ran for the door.

There was a knock on his door a few hours later, low and urgent.

"Toms?" A worried voice whispered through the hardwood. Tommy ignored it. He was sitting on his bed, staring at the wall. Trying not to think.

He couldn't even muster up an angry response.

Tommy was empty. He had nothing left to give.

"Tommy?" The voice repeated, "I'm sorry. Techno was right, I shouldn't have—I shouldn't have gotten upset with you, it's just...it's hard for me to understand you sometimes. And I shouldn't snap so quickly, I know, I just—none of us want to see you hurt, sunshine."

Tommy said nothing.

"--and I know it's not fair of me to assume stuff." Wilbur continued to whisper

The man went silent. Tommy heard a muffled voice, and strained to make out the words.

"--asleep, Wil, you should let the kid get some—"

There was the distinct sound of Wilbur sighing, "I'm not leaving, Phil, you know I can't—"

Tommy rolled towards the wall and went to bed.

The sixth day of the Antarctic gang's visit began in bitter silence.

At least it did on Tommy's part. The gang, on the other hand, seemed determined to confront him.

It started from the second he opened his door to find Wilbur crouched against the wall next to it, deep under the relentless grip of sleep. Tommy forced down the twinge of guilt he felt as he stepped over his slumped form—it was clear from the rumples in his normally pressed shirt that he'd been camped out there the entire night—and stumbled over to the kitchen.

Only to find a plate of fresh-made pancakes sitting on the countertop. Doused in syrup and powdered sugar, stacked three high, sweet enough to literally kill a man, just the way Tommy liked them. He wasn't even sure where they had the ingredients to make them, up here in the slums. A note sat next to them, written in Phil's old-fashioned cursive.

Hey mate, I thought I could start teaching you how to use those wings sometime today, meet me—

The plate shattered. Syrup ran down the wall. The note was left crumpled up in his hand, the rest unread.

As if he was some sort of child to be bribed by a shiny gift, a prize to distract him. As if he could forget all of his grievances so easily. For a moment Tommy was lost to the blistering rage burning its way through his insides.

A distant, stinging pain brought him out of it. Tommy glanced down at it, only to find a shard of porcelain embedded half an inch into his palm.

"Oh." He said, staring at it. "Oh."

A drop of blood trickled past the shard, down his hand. Tommy watched it hit the floor with indifference.

A voice somewhere nearby cleared their throat. Tommy's head snapped up. Technoblade was standing in the doorway of the kitchen, frowning at his hand. Tommy stared at him. In slow, precise movements, the man walked around him to the medicine cabinet, grabbed a roll of gauze, and set it down on the countertop next to him.

"Can I?" He asked quietly, making a small gesture at the shard of glass, the blood dripping off his palm.

Tommy stared at him. He stared at his hand.

Techno's brow furrowed.

"Okay, kid." He replied, still impossibly gentle, "That's okay."

Slowly, like he was made of glass, Techno reached down and picked up Tommy's hand in his own, turning it palm up and leaning closer. He made a small hiss of sympathy as he inspected the wound, wincing as if Tommy's pain was his own.

"This'll sting, Theseus." He said in a low voice as he reached for the wound. "Just for a bit."

The man eased the glass shard out of his palm in one smooth motion. Tommy made a small, hurt noise as the gash met air.

"I know. I know. S'okay, kid." Techno soothed, as he grabbed a bit of alcohol and poured it over a cloth dabbing it across his skin. He grabbed a kitchen knife and cut open a new package of bandages, setting them down against the countertop as he continued to dab at the wound, "It'll only be a moment and then—"

That was the moment that Karl chose to enter the room.

He shouted out a greeting as he strolled through the door. "Hey, Tommy, I cobbled together this new type of—"

Karl's eyes landed on them and he did a double take, freezing in the doorway.

"Um." The man said, intelligent as always. His eyes flickered from Tommy, to Techno at his side, to Tommy's hand—held in Techno's, and still gushing blood—to Techno's other hand. Holding a knife.

Karl's gaze might've been friendly, before. No longer. Techno dropped Tommy's hand like it had burned him. Tommy was pretty sure that didn't exactly help the optics of the situation.

"I just want to make clear," Techno said urgently, and more than a little awkwardly. "That this is not what it looks like. If you just look over—like I know this can't—"

"I don't particularly care." Karl responded icily, "Get out."

Techno looked like he was considering putting himself out of his misery. "I really didn't—I would never—this is a complete misunderstanding really—"

"Did I ask?" Karl retorted. Tommy wasn't sure he had ever heard the man sound so cold.

Techno looked—well, he looked a little scared. He took a deep, shaky breath.

Tommy bit his lip. The fog cleared.

See, Tommy knew that Techno was deeply, *deeply* socially awkward, but—even for him, this was *bad*. Like, it was *sort of* funny, wasn't it? Maybe he was just feeling vindictive today, but the edges of Tommy's lips turned upwards.

Techno was still trying to do damage control. "No, really, I know that you guys don't exactly trust us, considering we mur—"

Karl's expression tightened and Tommy had to bite back a snort as Techno realized his mistake and paled considerably.

"Look, I really just—" Techno's gaze flickered over to Tommy with thinly veiled desperation and he caught sight of the tiny smile that had broken through Tommy's melancholy, and—for a moment, Techno's expression went from panicked to something much softer. "Okay."

"Excuse me?" Karl's arms were crossed, his expression unimpressed.

"Yeah, I'll go." Techno sighed, and his hand patted Tommy's shoulder softly as the man left his side to trudge towards the door, "We'll talk later, okay Theseus?"

Tommy nodded. Karl shot a dirty glare at Techno's back. "Don't let the door hit you on the way out."

As soon as the door closed, he turned back to Tommy with a gentle smile. "Hey kiddo. You want me to clean that wound for you?"

The man grabbed the bandages without waiting for an answer, beginning to carefully wrap them around the wound on Tommy's hand. "So about that new invention of mine.."

Karl's voice was constant, rapid, rambling, and as always, familiar. His haunches went down, he relaxed again and, as if he was on autopilot, Tommy zoned back off again.

Techno must've said something about the interaction to Philza and Wilbur, because the two of them cornered him a few hours later in the training room.

He was less out of it by then—something about his conversation with Techno had grounded him, brought him back down to earth—and had moved on to the anger phase of his grief. He slammed his staff into a dummy. Over and over and over and—

"Toms." A voice said from behind him, sounding relieved, as a hand brushed against his shoulder.

Tommy jumped about a foot into the air and staggered away from it, spinning on his heel to find the two of them standing there, looking like two puppies who'd just been kicked. Wilbur was taking the lead of course, as usual, with Phil hovering just over his shoulder.

Wilbur reached for him again. "I'm so glad I found you."

Tommy jerked away from his hand. "Don't touch me."

Wilbur looked like he'd just been slapped across the face. Phil visibly winced. "Wilbur, I told you we should have waited--"

"I...sorry. I just." Wilbur stuttered, faltering under Tommy's glare, "I'm sorry. This, uh. This is for you."

Wilbur shoved something into his hands, something small and round and silver.

Tommy looked down at it and frowned.

"The ring." He laughed, but it was cold and bitter and broken. "You're giving me the ring from my first job. I guess it really was worthless after all, huh?"

"What? No!"

Distantly, there was the sound of footsteps. Good. Let them watch. Tommy didn't care anymore.

He just shook his head, sharp and resentful. "Sure, Will."

"Did nobody ever tell you?" Wilbur whispered, and he looked genuinely confused, so genuinely baffled that Tommy felt the anger surge up in him again.

Wilbur didn't get to be *confused*. He didn't get to be *upset*.

"Tell me *what*, Wilbur?" Tommy hissed, stumbling away, his eyes burning with anger or frustration or some other unidentifiable feeling. "You guys never tell me anything. That's been the whole problem this entire time."

"Tommy--" Phil tried, but Tommy wasn't listening anymore.

It was too much. Wilbur, and Phil, and the burning sensation of Sapnap's prying eyes that he could feel spying on the altercation from just outside the doorway, and it was so painfully awkward that Tommy could do nothing but panic at the confused jumble of emotions, the knot tightening in his chest.

"I-I can't deal with this--" Tommy stuttered, stumbling back from Phil, the ring clenched in one hand.

It was too much. It was all too much.

Tommy couldn't help it. He turned, and fled.

He was curled up in his bed, facing towards the wall, when his door creaked open.

"I'm coming in." A gruff voice announced. Not *asked*. *Announced*.

Tommy didn't move, but his expression went sour as he stared at the wall. "I don't want to talk to you."

"Theseus." Techno sighed, a gentle admonition. When Tommy didn't respond, light footsteps made their way across the room. Tommy felt the bed dip behind him as the man perched on the edge of the mattress. "Tommy."

“Leave me alone. Please.” There wasn’t even anger in his voice, not anymore. Just a bone deep, crushing sort of defeat.

The anger was still there, deep at his core, sure. Anger like that didn’t just go away, not after so long and so much that had happened. It was there, but it was muted, painted in grays and deep blues and tinged with sadness. There, then, in that instant, all Tommy really felt was hollow.

“You know I can’t do that.” Techno’s voice replied. A cool, calloused hand settled on his shoulder. “C’mon kid. What’s on your mind?”

Something tightened in Tommy’s chest, like a fist gripping his heart, squeezing, squeezing, until his heart bled through the seams and Tommy couldn’t help but ask what he’d been wondering all this time. “I don’t understand, Techno. Why me? I’m nothing.”

The hand resting on his shoulder pulled back abruptly for half a second, a small confused noise escaping from somewhere over his shoulder. “That—where did you get that from?”

Tommy curled tighter into himself, hugging his knees with the one arm that wasn’t pinned against the bed. “It’s true, isn’t it? Theseus is—he’s useful, and powerful, and important, but I’m just Tommy. You can’t take him away from me. You can’t. I’m nothing. Why would you want me if not for him?”

“Oh Tommy. *Tommy*. You are so much more than him.” The hand returned resting against his back, rubbing it in small, comforting circles. Techno’s voice sounded more broken then Tommy had ever heard it, distraught almost. Tommy still couldn’t bring himself to meet his eyes, to glance over and see the expression waiting there for him. He didn’t think he could stand it if there was pity there. “From the moment I met you on that call, I knew you were going to be something special. One of our best recruits. You’d already won over Wilbur by then, somehow, and he can be—well, you know how stubborn he can be. I knew you had to be something great to even manage that, and when you joined the call hours late and managed to take even me by surprise, when you accepted the job of climbing the Walls, all of this and I just knew—”

“Yeah. The Walls.” Tommy interrupted, voice numb, eyes dull, “Those—I—I’m just wondering…”

He hesitated. The questions were burning inside him, a tangible pressure in his chest that needed to be let out so he could finally breathe, an unavoidable, inevitable part of the conversation but… But. Tommy wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer.

Would it be worse, to know for certain that everything was a lie? Would it be better to deal with it as it was, the not knowing, the uncertainty?

“Yes, Th—*Tommy* ?” Techno’s voice was impossibly gentle.

Techno had always been too observant, too persistent. Quiet, yes, but he watched everything, every interaction, every fight, every emotion lingering just beneath his skin. Tommy always felt like he could see right through him. His only saving grace was that Techno had never called him out on any of it.

Until now at least. It was clear that this time Techno wasn’t letting him off the hook.

Tommy sat up and pulled his legs up to his chest. Hugging his arms around his knees, fiddling with his hands, unable to meet Techno’s eyes for fear of what he might find there. “Were they really all for nothing? My…tests?”

Techno could almost hear Techno’s frown. “They were never—Wilbur was wrong to say that to you. They were never for nothing, they were just…okay, so technically the Walls thing wasn’t exactly—”

Tommy’s face fell. That wasn’t a no. Techno spotted it and winced.

“Fuck.” Techno heaved out a defeated sigh, his head sinking to rest in his hands. “I’m screwing this all up, aren’t I? It’d probably be better to have Wilbur come in here and talk to you about all this. Or Phil. Stars know the kids always like him more than me. I can just—” The man, dejectedly, went to push himself off Tommy’s bed, shaking his head like he was disappointed in himself, and Tommy felt a wave of panic wash over him—Wilbur had been the one to keep everything hidden from him in the first place, and Phil was far too good at softening everything. Nobody had given him the hard, honest truth since the very beginning, not like Techno had.

Tommy’s hand shot out and grabbed the man’s wrist.

“No.” Tommy replied a little too quickly, “No. I want it to be you. I know you’ll tell me the truth.”

Techno froze. He glanced at Tommy over his shoulder with wide eyes, his mouth opening and closing for a second before settling into a small, suppressed smile. There was something immensely gratified in his expression as he slowly sat back down.

“Ah. Yes. Okay, then.” He cleared his throat, trying and failing to school his expression into something less fond, “We’ve never...brought someone into our circle, you know. Not like you. But with...what we’re handling, Phil thought it prudent that we add someone a bit more subtle to our little band of outlaws. It’s just the selection process we were having difficulty with. As much as we enjoy the company of our allies in the Depths...everyone there has their own ties. Nobody is exactly...well, trustworthy.”

Tommy snorted.

“And you thought *I* was a better option?” he asked with clear disbelief.

“Believe it or not, yes. It was a recommendation from a friend of sorts. You had a reputation for being discreet, and you seemed like the perfect solution—a great track record, stealthy, but...” Techno let out half a chuckle, “Wilbur can be a little...”

“Obstinate?” Tommy finished for him, “Pushy? Antagonistic?”

“Twitchy.” Techno finished with a half grin, “He needed to be sure you were right for us or he’d second guess himself, and then we’d be back at step one and the cycle would continue on forever. I didn’t...know you. Or care for you, as I might now. I knew it could be done, so it just... logically, it made sense.”

Tommy tilted his head, eyes burning with curiosity, enough to overshadow even the numbness. “You...you knew it could be done? How?”

There was a long pause. A shadow fell over Techno’s eyes. “Manburg wasn’t the only city built after the Flash, kid. There used to be others too.”

Tommy’s brow furrowed. Nothing had survived the Flash, *nothing*. Everyone knew that. Only Manburg had managed to rise up through the ashes—it was something his tutors had hammered into his mind since his first days of classes.

But.

But during his time in the Underground, Tommy had heard stories—tall tales of other, better cities in far away places, rumors that Schlatt was stopping them from communicating with others. *But* Techno said the sentence with such confidence, such certainty, that Tommy couldn’t help but think...“What happened to them?”

“Some ran out of resources and slowly wilted away. Some got overrun by the creatures outside their boundaries.” Techno’s face went steely, his lips pressing into a thin line, “Some got taken out by other cities.”

Dots were beginning to connect in Tommy's mind—why Techno had met Wilbur and Phil years after they knew each other, the scars Tommy had seen on his arms, the way Techno had never invoked the name of Prime, "So...you, that means...then..."

The man's expression was grim. "Let's just say I knew it could be done."

It was an explanation, certainly, but it still wasn't enough. It explained before, sure, but what about after they met? When Tommy was in the base, and confused, and all he wanted was to do was go back to his job?

"I still—I don't understand. It doesn't make sense. I'm a thief, Techno. That's what I do. Thieve." Tommy whispered, and finally, *finally*, he met Techno's eyes. He was sure every emotion, every uncertainty, was painted plainly across his face. "Why would you keep me around if not to have me do that? Why else would you...want me?"

Techno's face fell, and there it was—the pity. Tommy couldn't stand it. "You—you don't have to be useful to be important, you know that, right?" An uncertain pause. "Right, Tommy?"

"What about my other jobs?" Tommy asked in lieu of an answer, "The ring, the microchip?"

Techno's face twisted. It was clear Tommy's avoidance of the question hadn't gone unnoticed.

"The microchip was just an ordinary job, really. Some of our spies needed to get their hands on some new tech to barter or use, and Wilbur figured what better way to test you than sending you into that fucking deathtrap that is TechCorp. I thought for sure you were a goner when you showed up late that day." Techno's eyes turned to Tommy with unnerving sharpness, "Why were you so late, anyway?"

Nope. No way was he dealing with *Dream* too, today. Tommy hurried to change the subject. "And what about this? The ring."

There was a long moment of quiet where Techno just looked at him. Just watched him falter.

"You know, Theseus." Techno said, his voice caught between something dangerous and sad. "I think it's a little unfair that I'm answerin' all of your questions and you're not doing the decency of answering mine. Don't think Wilbur hasn't told me about this Dream person you were so terrified of."

"I'm *not* scared of him." Tommy protested. A lie.

"I know you aren't. But I'd still like to talk about it eventually." A pause. "If he hurt you—"

Tommy's lips pressed into a thin line. His frame trembled. Techno cut himself off the instant he noticed, softening his voice. "You can tell us. You can tell *me*."

There was a long, empty moment. Tommy curled deeper into himself.

"I—the ring, Techno? What about the ring?" Tommy asked.

He was grateful that Techno ignored the tremor in his voice.

"The ring. That gods-damned ring." Techno sighed, long and hard. "We...we used to have a fourth leader in our gang. It was Wilbur and Phil at first, until they found me in those fighting pits, and for a while we were three. The Ram, the Boar, and the Raven. Then," Techno paused, swallowed hard, "Then, Wilbur found a kid."

"A tech *mastermind*. Decades ahead of some of the other talent we had ever seen. Could tear down firewalls in seconds. And we—well, we took him under our wing. And then we were four. The Ram, the Boar, the Raven, and the Fox. The kid stayed with us for three years, and for three years, we were a team. More than that. On the first anniversary of him joining us, Wilbur gave us each one of these." From under his white,

flowing shirt, Techno pulled out a small silver chain. Hanging on the end of the necklace was a small silver ring. Identical to the one Tommy had stolen for his first job, identical to the one clutched in his palm.

"He spent weeks designing them. I've never seen him so devoted to anything but his revolver. For three years it continued, and then one day we woke up and—he was just gone. His room was empty, all his tech vanished and—we thought he'd been kidnapped or something. Will was devastated. Went basically catatonic for weeks." Techno's eyes narrowed. "Imagine our surprise when three months later, our Fox reappeared, wrapped in fur and jewelry, as the newly ordained Archbishop of Manburg."

Tommy blinked. What.

"Fundy?!" Tommy screeched, "That was your— *him* ? But he's—he's so—"

Jumpy. Tense. Insecure. The guy was a total pushover, to be perfectly honest. Not exactly what Tommy would have expected.

"Yeah." Techno huffed a bitter laugh, "I'm sure you can imagine how we felt about him after that. Wilbur was never the same. Neither was Phil, though he shows it less. Sometimes I catch him staring at Fundy's old door."

"And you?" Tommy asked.

Techno stared at him. "Me what?"

"What did that do to you?"

Techno's eyes widened minutely, like he was surprised Tommy had even asked, before his frown deepened and his glaze flickered down to his hands. "I...managed. I managed."

"Wilbur was hell bent on getting the ring back after that. Thought he didn't deserve it anymore, and I can't say I disagree." A bitter smile grace his face for half a second, his eyes distant. "He was so happy when you got it back. I assume he must have melted it back down by now. Returned it to the earth."

Oh. The ring. Wilbur had given him—

"He didn't. He didn't melt it down." Tommy whispered.

Techno raised an eyebrow in disbelief. "He told you?"

Tommy hesitated.

"Not exactly..." he said slowly, holding out his hand, opening his palm. Revealing what had been clenched inside. "He. Uh. Will gave it to me."

"Hm." Techno hummed, his face unreadable, his eyes sparkling as he looked at it. "Interesting. I suppose this is yours then. It's yours Tommy."

"I know you say that, but Techno, I still don't understand." Tommy protested, "Why *me* ? I—if Fundy was some big tech genius, an *asset*, why the hell would you need me to be your fourth? I can't hardly get a hard drive to work, much less hack, I can't...what could I possibly bring to the table? Why would you ever choose me?"

"Tommy." Techno said quietly, solemnly, "I think you were one of us from the moment we found you bleeding out on the floor of that apartment."

"You looked so impossibly small, sitting there in that chair, all hunched over on yourself, and—I couldn't believe it was you because you were shaking so hard and you looked so, so tiny. I thought for sure we had

made some sort of mistake and I had just burst into some random kid's house, and—but then you leveled that gun at me and threatened to shoot it into my eye, and I knew that it was *you*. *Our* Theseus, and you were just a kid, a scared, hurt kid, all alone—you were just like I was, and that was all it took for me. Wilbur, well, he's always had a soft spot for kids. He had a little brother once, I think, and that messed him up. He's still got the big brother instinct up there and seeing a kid he actually liked talking with all beat up sure as hell set that off, but he just doesn't understand how not to be protective, not anymore. It probably didn't help that—and I don't know if you've noticed this—you guys are incredibly similar. Phil? He practically raised Wilbur, and when L'manburg fell he saw him lose his entire childhood in an instant. He just doesn't want you to go through the same thing and thinks he can parent it out of you. In his mind, a kid like you doesn't deserve to be forced into this life. He just doesn't get that you're *not* being forced, that this is what you want. We really do just want you to be happy, kid.”

"But—but you said I couldn't leave because I was a risk. You said--"

“Tommy, maybe in the beginning we didn't trust you. Maybe we didn't want you to leave because you were a security risk—but now? Tommy, I just genuinely like having you around. You're fun. You'll talk about my myths with me. You match the energy of our little group. It's not easy, you know. Staying down there in that hole, always fighting and planning and watching over our shoulders. Missing the warmth of the sun on our skin.” Techno shuddered, as if remembering it. “And you are that...that sun for us. You don't know what it was like before you were around. Sometimes we wouldn't speak to each other for days at a time, we were so absorbed in our work. It was grim. You brighten the whole base.”

Him? No, that—that couldn't be right. He was a nuisance there, an issue to be handled. Hell, Wilbur hadn't even spoken to him for those first couple weeks, that couldn't—Tommy shook his head wordlessly. That couldn't be right, that—why would they even want him there at all? He wasn't—he wasn't the type of person who was nice, who lit up a room when they walked in. He was crude, and blunt, and sharp, and it didn't make *sense*—

"Stop it. I'm telling you the truth.” Techno cut in, and there was no room for argument in his voice, “I can see the wheels turning in your head. I'm telling you, Wilbur and Phil, they want to help you, Tommy. We all do. They just don't get that sometimes coddling someone isn't the best way to do that. Wilbur's always had Phil, you know, but I was all by myself for a while, and by the time Phil found me...I wasn't so different from you. Distrustful, aggressive, stubborn as *hell* —”

Techno let out half a laugh as he said it, and for a minute the look in his eyes was so unbelievably fond that Tommy could've cried. “But I was lost. In a new city with no one to turn to, a recent escapee of one of the Underground's nastier fighting ring, trying to find my place. So once Phil found me, directed that anger, gave me a home—I found my place pretty quickly. With you, it's different. They don't understand it.”

“I think I might. Better at least.” Techno said, no, *offered*, “I can help them understand too. You don't need to—to—”

It was still too much for him, still too close to the elephant in the room. Tommy couldn't handle it. He was already grappling with so much new information, he couldn't handle talking about this now. He needed time.

“Techno...” Tommy pleaded, and the man sighed. Tommy couldn't tell if it was defeat or disappointment or something unrecognizable hidden in the sound.

“It's okay, kid.” He replied, and in an instant the comforting weight at Tommy's side was gone. It made the whole room feel colder, somehow. “Just think about it.”

And then he was gone and Tommy was alone again.

Chapter End Notes

sorry for the delay! i've had a bit of a rough time this month (my apartment burned down, i got a job, and was disowned and only one of those is a lie) so i really appreciate you all waiting for the chapter

hope you enjoyed! <333

i have 3k of the next chapter done so more to come soon

Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

imagine having everyone who's ever wronged you locked in a room and forced to listen as you explain how they hurt you and you'll have this chapter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The dawn of the seventh day, the *final* day, began in what could only be described as an intricate dance of avoidance.

It's not even that I'm upset anymore, Tommy thought as he slammed his fist into the punching bag, sending it spiraling away from him. *It's the principle of it. I'm not even that angry.*

But that wasn't exactly right, was it? Tommy *was* still upset. He was still so incredibly angry, and resentful, and bitter about it all, but it wasn't the raw, fresh wound that it was before. It was just... *there*.

I just can't let it go. Prime forgive me, maybe I'm a horrible person but I just can't let it be. He brought his knee up in a wide arc to pound into the bag and it shuddered away from him. *I can't believe in them. I can't just-just...ugh.*

It was dumb. The whole thing was just—Prime it should be over now, shouldn't it? Tommy knew now that they hadn't been acting without good reason, and Techno's explanation had settled all of the loose ends of their story.

A sharp elbow to the leather. Another kick.

Phil was just oblivious, in unfamiliar territory. Techno saw Tommy in himself. Wilbur was over-protective and frigid because he'd been hurt before.

All things considered they—it made sense. What more could he possibly want? What more of an explanation could he—too sharp, too aggressive Tommy— even ask for?

But Tommy had always been stubborn to a fault and pessimistic beyond all rational sense and it was something deeper now, a scar that had long since scabbed over. He knew there was an explanation now, a reason behind Wilbur and Phil's actions and that he should understand and talk to them and figure everything out but...he was still upset. He'd spent so long being angry about them, about this, that the explanation just—it wasn't enough for him right now.

He didn't know how to explain it, the jumbled knot of emotions battling in his chest, but he was still angry and he wasn't sure how to shake it. He didn't want to confront it, or explain it, or talk it through. He just wanted to be upset a little while longer.

So when Tommy stepped into the kitchen earlier that morning and saw Techno sitting at the table, he pivoted on his heel. When Phil stepped into Tommy's workshop and tried to grab his attention, Tommy brushed past him without a word. When Wilbur went to retrieve the gang's weapons from the armory, Tommy suddenly realized he desperately needed to have a conversation with Sapnap about...weapon plans or something. Wherever they entered, Tommy would find the quickest possible excuse to be elsewhere and take it without a second thought.

Which was how he ended up here, he supposed. Slamming his fists into a punching bag.

“Hey Tommy!” Karl’s head poked in the room, face painted in his typical, cheery smile, “You think I could talk to you for a second kiddo?”

Prime, was it too much to ask to be left alone? Could nobody give him *one fucking second* to get his thoughts together, figure things out? *One*. That’s all he asked for. *One, singular—*

Tommy bit his lip to keep himself from snapping at the man. It wasn’t Karl’s fault his life was absolute shit.

“Sure, Karl.” He forced out through gritted teeth, his voice tired. “Sure, man.”

Karl clearly either didn’t pick up on the strain in his voice or didn’t care because he visibly brightened, waving Tommy over as the boy unwrapped the cloth over his knuckles and shook the sweat out of his hair. “Oh, great! Follow me, I’ve really been needing to talk to you about this new weapon design I put together, it’s totally insane, and well, no offense, but you’re always sorta the perfect guinea pig—”

Tommy didn’t mean to tune Karl out, really. He was just overwhelmed, and tired, and honestly just didn’t think he had the mental capacity to deal with any social interaction.

It felt like he was mourning. Like he was standing on the precipice of something he couldn’t go back from, and everything was just looming over him like a dark cloud, a choking sense of foreboding, something terrifying and uncertain and uncontrollable, and everything was too complicated for him to figure out. It was too much.

So yeah, Tommy just let the words wash over him as he trailed numbly after Karl. He didn’t even register where they were going until the man turned down the hallway to the Feral boys’ interrogation rooms.

Strange, Tommy thought, but he had been staying with Karl for months now, there was no reason to think anything of it, and then Tommy’s hand bumped against the wall and suddenly he was too preoccupied thinking of the stab of pain up his arm and the bead of blood that ran down his palm as part of the wound on his hand reopened, and maybe he could ask Techno to patch it up again, but he shouldn’t, he really, really shouldn’t, and—

“Oh! Here we are, follow me kiddo, in here, yeah.” Karl brought him back to reality as he held open one of the thick metal doors for Tommy, gesturing him through the entryway and into the interrogation room.

There was nothing special about it. Tommy had seen their interrogation rooms before-- and nothing much had changed since then--white, soundproof walls, glossy tile floors, two metal chairs, and a sturdy table.

There was nothing of the--what was it, Karl had said they were here for? A weapons test?--in the room. “And Tommy, I’ve seen you in training and I’m pretty sure you could murder me with your bare hands, so I just wanted to let you know that this was totally George’s idea, and I’m totally super sorry about this.”

Tommy glanced over his shoulder as the man rambled, and it struck him that Karl hadn’t actually entered the room. He was standing just beyond the entryway, fidgeting in that lively, anxious way of his, not meeting Tommy’s eyes.

He took a step. “Wait, wha—”

The door slammed shut in his face.

“Karl?” Tommy rushed towards the door, his heart stuttering in his chest. The handle clicked as he jiggled it, but didn’t budge. “Dude, Karl what the absolute—”

“I’m sorry dude, he’s my boss! I mean, you’re scary and all but have you met George? He knows where I sleep!” Karl’s voice was apologetic, but unwavering. No footsteps approached the door.

Oh stars. Oh Prime, Karl was not—he was *not* being trapped in here. Why would—? Oh *Prime*.

"What—what the fuck does George have to do with any of this? What the fuck did he tell you to—and—" Tommy shrieked, trying to keep the panic out of his voice. He processed the last thing Karl had said. "And so do I!"

There was a tense pause. The door didn't move.

Tommy's head whipped around, searching the room—was this some sort of test or something? There was nothing fucking *here*. His breath hitched again, and his voice went up another half an octave as he banged his fist against the door. "Karl, why the hell did you put me in here, there's nothing in the room!"

"You'll see." Karl chirped, as if that was cryptic as *fuck*. As if that wasn't ominous enough to send him spiraling.

The room wasn't small by any means, but it wasn't spacious either, especially not when it felt like the walls were shrinking with every passing second

"What the fuck does that—Karl!" The footsteps had gone quiet. Tommy banged on the door again, pressing his ear against the metal. "Karl?"

Tommy was only met with silence.

Even Tommy could admit this was bad.

From the instant Karl had abandoned him, his hands were trembling so badly that every attempt at using one of his lockpicks sent them tumbling from his hands.

It had taken him five minutes to descend into a panic so fierce he couldn't breathe. After ten minutes black began creeping around the edges of his vision and he gave up entirely on trying to reason his way out of the room—Karl hated him and wanted him dead and was trying to *kill* him, and he'd left him trapped in this *too small* prison and.

By the time he curled up in the corner of the room, he'd lost track. He barely even registered the footsteps approaching him.

A low, muffled voice spoke from just outside the room. "I can't help but notice this does not seem to be a very library-looking hallway, Sapnap."

A scoff. "Dude, this is literally the fifth time you've said that, now I don't know what fancy-ass shit you have in your guys' base man, but honestly it's a little fucking rude that you keep shitting on ours. It's not much, I know, but you could at least have the decency to show a little respect. Now, are you going to help me find this book or not?"

Tommy heard the words, but couldn't process them, couldn't make himself understand. He knew he should be shouting, or saying something, anything to let the people outside know he was trapped, dying, *suffocating*, but he couldn't even work up the nerve to make it to the door. All there was was the cold metal walls and the blood thrumming through his veins and the weight on his chest.

There was a long, exasperated sigh. "Whatever. If you try to mug me, I'll shank you."

"Great. Come right in here."

A click, movement in his peripheral, a flash of pink, and then—

“Tommy?” A voice gasped.

Tommy’s head snapped upward at the sound, his chest heaving. “Techno? Why are you—?”

Something about the look on Tommy’s face must have been particularly terrified because in three long strides Techno was across the room and kneeling at his side, his hand coming up to rest against Tommy’s shoulder, staring at him with evident concern.

“Stars, Tommy? Can you hear me?” Techno asked, and Tommy nodded his head frantically, gasping in air. “Deep breaths, Toms, it’s alright.”

It was alright. Tommy repeated it like a mantra. It was alright, he was *fine*.

“What’s wrong with him?” Sapnap asked from behind Techno, sounding much less self-assured than a moment earlier. “Why is he breathing like that?”

“He’s claustrophobic, dipshit.” Techno hissed with rare emotion, his eyes never leaving Tommy, “Why the hell was he locked in here?”

There was a pause, a gulp, and then a fast patter of footprints as Sapnap sprinted towards the door and slammed it shut.

“Sapnap!” Techno yelled, shifting as if to chase after him before he glanced back at Tommy’s face and seemed to reconsider.

He settled further next to him, his hand still a steady weight on Tommy’s shoulder, his breathing exaggerated enough that Tommy could follow the movement of his chest and copy it.

It took another ten minutes for Tommy to settle his breathing back to its normal speed. Techno waited next to him for the entirety of it, calm and patient and *there*, and when Tommy slumped against his side, he just asked, “Are you doing better?”

And then Tommy realized that he was *slumped* against *Techno* after a *panic attack* and he was acting like a total *bitch*, and the last thing he needed was Techno thinking he was *weak*. He pushed himself to his feet, grateful when Techno didn’t mention anything about how tightly Tommy had been gripping his arm or how hard his legs were shaking.

“We don’t speak of this.” was all he said.

Techno’s lips quirked in a small smile. “Sure, Tommy.”

Tommy and Techno were sitting side by side, speaking quietly when the sound of footsteps echoed through the room.

“--thought you said there was a weapons misfire.” Familiar, muffled voices approached from just outside the door, and this time—this time, they were ready. Tommy and Techno shared a meaningful glance before Tommy shot to his feet, stalking towards the door.

“This is nowhere near the training facility, man, even I’ve been around long enough to know—”

The door swung open, revealing two familiar figures stepping into the room—the one in the front a tall man with fluffy brown hair, and just behind him a figure with shaggy black hair and a white bandana around his head.

“You?” Tommy blurted.

Oh no. No, no, he did not want to talk to Wilbur. He'd spent all day *avoiding* talking to Wilbur. He--the whole point was he didn't want to confront this, and now--

He stumbled backward, nearly losing his balance, and Wilbur's head whipped towards him at the sound of his voice. Techno caught him with one steady hand on his shoulder, and Tommy shrunk further away from the door into its relative safety. "Oh Prime, this can not be happening, this can not--"

"Kid." Techno said, "It's fine. It's *fine*. Wilbur's not upset. Everything's alright."

Wilbur's brow furrowed. Somewhere in the background, the door clicked shut. Tommy's breath quickened further.

"Tommy. *Relax*, kid. Deep breaths." Techno repeated, but all Tommy could do was watch as Wilbur looked at the door, as his mouth tightened into a frown, as he walked over and tried the handle. It didn't budge.

Tommy latched onto Techno's voice like a lifeline, and finally, his breath slowed minutely. "I'm good. I--I'm good."

Unnervingly calm, Wilbur turned to face the two of them again, eye's narrowing at the way Tommy was leaning into Techno's grip, flickering between them suspiciously, like he was trying to figure out whether they were at fault for this somehow or if he had been left out of some vitally important conversation. "Either of you care to explain why exactly I've been locked in a storage closet?"

"Geez, Wilbur, dramatic as usual." Techno rolled his eyes, "Trust me, we're enjoyin' this just as much as you. Tommy's...friends took it upon themselves to arrange some mandatory family time."

Family time.

Tommy winced. Not much of a family were they? Hardly even a team at this point. Ironical that his own words, his lie to George, were going to be used against him like this.

At least fucking *Phil* wasn't here. Tommy didn't feel like being condescended on top of everything else.

Of course, right on cue, the door flew open, and a frazzled looking Phil rushed in. His head whipped between the three of them, face red and chest heaving. "Karl said someone was--somebody got hurt, did--are you okay? Are any of you--why are all three of you in here? Karl said--"

The door slammed shut behind him.

Wilbur buried his face in his hands with a groan. Techno banged his head back against the wall, glaring up at the ceiling.

"He lied." Tommy deadpanned, marching past a dumbstruck Phil to bang against the door, "Hey asshole! Real funny. You want to let us out now?"

Karl's muffled voice came from the other side of the door, infuriatingly matter-of-fact. "Now, I know you might not want to hear this Tommy, but you guys should really talk things out while you still have the chance. It's important for all healthy relationships that there's established trust and communic--"

"You can come out once you deal with your shit!" Sapnap cut in with a yell, "Dramatic motherfuckers. Just *talk*!"

There was a shuffling sound from outside the door, a muffled grunt like someone had just been elbowed, a chiding *Sapnap* and a miffed *you know I'm right, Karl* that faded into more angry whispers Tommy couldn't quite make out.

“Oh my Prime,” He rolled his eyes, banging his fist on the door again. The whispers went quiet, and he knew he had gotten their attention. “Tell George I have many, *many* explosives with his name on it once I get out of this place. Fuckers.”

“Big talk for someone without a key.” Sapnap’s voice taunted, “Deal with it. We’re sick of you lot being all moody. Really ruins our whole vibe.”

Hold up. They were complaining that his—his fucking *trauma*, all of this emotional distress that he’d been in, was ruining their *vibe*? *That* was their issue?

Tommy was going to strangle somebody with his bare hands. He was one more dumb comment away from screaming.

“Sapnap. Asshole! Hey!” Tommy kicked the door so hard the entire frame shuddered, “Sapnap?”

Deafening silence.

Tommy never would’ve come to the Feral gang if he knew they’d fucking *betray him*.

“Fuck.” Tommy hissed, slumping against the door in defeat, staring at his hands. “They’re not budging. Stubborn assholes.”

Wilbur huffed. “So we’re just locked in here? What do we—”

‘We’. What a fucking lie.

“*We* don’t do anything. *You* guys sit on your asses and wait, and *I* figure out how to pick this lock.” Tommy snapped, pulling his lockpick set out of his boot and stomping towards the door.

Phil’s lips pressed together for just a moment as Tommy passed him, and then, gently, he said, “Toms, you don’t think maybe they’ve got a point, that maybe—”

“No.” Tommy snapped.

“We’re here already, surely it couldn’t hurt to—”

“I said, *drop it*.” Tommy snatched his lockpicks out of his set, and slammed the first one into the door’s lock so aggressively it snapped clean into two. He just sighed and pulled out another one.

He was, surprisingly, struggling to pick the lock, but maybe that was just because of how badly his hands were trembling. He couldn’t quite focus, not when he could just barely make out the three of them whispering over his shoulders. They’d started up a few minutes after he began messing with the door and hadn’t quieted since, and it was driving him *insane*.

Tommy paused working on the door for a second, just a second. Not to listen in or anything, of course not. He was just...taking a break, when he happened to overhear part of the conversation.

Phil was stern, speaking low and firm, clearly trying to talk Wilbur down. “--don’t think that’s a good idea. You need to let him make his own decision for this, Wilbur. Give him space, some time to figure things out—”

Tommy had to muffle a snort. Always the mediator.

“We don’t *have* time, Phil!” Wilbur whispered back, sharp as a knife, “We have to leave today. That was the deal, Phil, and I don’t fucking break my word. We don’t have any fucking longer.”

“We’d have all the time in the world if it wasn’t for *someone*.” Techno’s voice, quiet but gruff, verging on angry.

“Fuck you.” Wilbur hissed back.

From the corner of his eye, Tommy watched Phil pinch the bridge of his nose. His voice sounded tired. “No pointing fingers Techno, we talked about this.”

“It’s not pointing fingers if I’m right.”

Tommy snorted and rushed to cover it up with a cough. When he glanced upward again the three of them were staring at him. Phil’s eyes sparkled with knowing mirth.

Nothing was fucking funny about this.

“Stop whispering.” Tommy snapped a little too quickly, “I need quiet to focus.”

He turned back to the door and forced himself to stop eavesdropping. He didn’t want to hear it. He just needed to get out of here.

Unfortunately, that did nothing to drown out the whispers.

“--to go talk to him--”

“That’s a horrible idea--”

“You can’t st--”

“Wilbur, *don’t*--”

Footsteps began padding across the room before Phil finished his sentence. Tommy, pettily, refused to turn and meet his eyes, even as he felt the presence stop behind him.

“Tommy.” Wilbur began slowly, gentler than usual, “I don’t understand what you want? I know that we--”

From somewhere in the background, Techno cleared his throat pointedly.

Wilbur huffed, and Tommy could almost see him throwing an annoyed glance over his shoulder. “--I, really fucked things over but...I’m trying, okay? I talked to Techno, and I’m trying to understand, and-- what can we do to make it better?”

And here it was, the very question he had been asking himself all along: could he get past everything? Would it

Tommy froze, and then slowly set down his lockpicks.

His head bowed to the floor, his eyes shut tight.

He knew what he needed to say, but he didn’t think he’d be able to meet their eyes when he said it. It was too vulnerable for him, like he was cutting open his chest and pulling open his ribcage, and all it would take was one pitying look or one careless word and they’d puncture his heart.

“That’s not--it’s not that *easy*, Wil. It’s not a cut that you can just put a band-aid on to make things alright, okay? This was--you lied to me for *months*. All of you. Do you get what that means to me? That for months I was living there, getting more and more...complacent, starting to believe I might actually have a place again, and you all knew. You all knew and were keeping it from me, and...and laughing at me. You *laughed*

at me. And I can't help but sit here and wonder that if you all knew that, how much else I didn't know. How many times you all sat around when I wasn't there and talked about how *stupid* I was."

The room was dead silent as Tommy took a shaking breath. His voice was trembling now, but he pushed on. "And then you show up here and execute two dozen guards—people I *knew*—saying shit about how sorry you are and how things will change and then you—you still don't. Nothing changed. It fucking hurts."

Tommy pushed himself up from where he was kneeling against the ground. One hand pressing against the door as he stood, and his eyes traced over the scars that criss-crossed his skin: a thin line where he'd cut open his thumb trying to learn how to throw knives, a burn scar where a guard had put out a cigarette, the ever-present scabs over his knuckles.

Were the three of them, too, just another in a long series of scars?

A horrible mix of anticipation and dread burned in his stomach, and he took a deep, steeling breath. There was already no going back. He needed to see their expressions. No harm in sealing his fate.

"How—how am I ever supposed to believe that if I go back to the Depths you'll even let me leave again? How the hell am I supposed to trust you?" Tommy bit his lip and turned to face them.

Devastation was too kind a word.

Phil was eerily pale. Wilbur looked as if it was the first time he had ever felt guilt and he was not enjoying the experience. Techno was the only one who seemed unsurprised, and even his hands were clenched into fists.

"I—I don't know. I—maybe you're right, I—" Wilbur sunk down into a chair, white as a ghost, "Oh Prime. This whole time we—we really fucked this up haven't we?"

Tommy bit his lip. Wilbur pressed his palms into his eyes for one long moment, took a few, deep, tense breaths, and then stood up in one smooth motion, his eyes burning with intensity. "What do you need from us? How can we prove to you that we're sorry?"

That was the question, wasn't it? Problem was, Tommy didn't know. He could barely figure out his own tangled mess of emotions. How could he possibly explain to them what he needed?

"I've been, uh, putting it off a bit but..." Tommy said carefully, "I guess I really do need to make a decision, huh? On what I'm going to do."

That certainly got their attention. Techno's undivided attention bored into the side of his head. Wilbur's eyes lit up.

"Come back to the Depths with us Tommy. We'll make you part of our empire. Proper, this time." Wilbur said softly, all saccharine smiles and silver tongued, and maybe it was just wishful thinking but it really, honestly felt genuine for once. Like he might actually want Tommy to join them. Like they were equals.

And—that was all he really wanted. That was all he had ever wanted. The notoriety, the importance, *matter*ing.

But—he still wasn't sure. He didn't know if he could believe it. It all seemed far too good to be true.

Tommy wanted to trust the Antarctic gang, really. But he didn't. And he wasn't sure how he could know for sure, without going back, without risking everything again.

And then Tommy was hit, suddenly, brilliantly, with an idea.

He paused as it took shape in his mind

It was cruel, just a bit. Cruel, but necessary.

He just needed to know for sure.

He needed to be absolutely positive. He just...

Tommy turned towards the three of them. Techno, leaning against the back wall of the room, his arms crossed over his chest. His face was impassive as ever, but his stance was just a bit more tense than usual, his eyes flickering between pretending to stare at the wall and looking in on the conversation.

Phil, reaching out as if to grab Wilbur's shoulder, as if to hold him back, torn between de-escalating the situation and continuing the conversation.

Wilbur, standing in front of the two of them, in his stupid trenchcoat and stupid beanie, looking, for all the world, *desperate*.

"I can't go with you Wilbur." Tommy whispered, "I just can't. You understand? I can't."
Wilbur's face shuttered, his eyes flashing with something hurt, something shaken. Something dark.

Even after everything, he still hadn't thought Tommy would actually leave them behind.

The dark thing rose up in Wilbur's eyes, surging up like a storm until his pupils had gone entirely black. His fists clenched. For a moment Tommy was horrifyingly unsure of just what Wilbur might do.

At his side, Techno had gone eerily still. Philza had a hand pressed over his mouth.

The moment stretched out like an eternity, the tension in the air growing thicker, and thicker, until Tommy could hardly breathe and then—

Wilbur deflated. His face smoothed over, the dark *thing* in his gaze replaced by a devastating sort of grief.

"Okay." He gritted out. Techno's head whipped around to stare at him, and Wilbur shot him a glare.

"Okay, Toms." Wilbur repeated, though it looked like it physically pained him to say it, "That's alright. Okay."

And Tommy—Tommy could tell he wasn't lying. It was his tone, the reluctant acceptance, the beginnings of grief. Wilbur understood. Finally, finally, he understood what Tommy had been asking for all along. He—*they* cared enough to let him decide this for himself.

That was all he had ever wanted.

The weight that lifted off of his chest in that instant felt like a physical thing, something he hadn't even realized was there until suddenly he could breathe again, until the tension seeped from his entire body. For just a moment, Tommy was well and truly *happy*.

He couldn't remember the last time he had felt like that.

Tommy couldn't stop a watery smile from stretching across his face as he pushed himself off of the wall and barreled into Wilbur's chest.

They stayed like that for a moment, Wilbur clutching Tommy to his chest as if he might disappear if even an inch of separation came between them, Tommy gripping him back like a vise, when Tommy felt something warm and wet and salty land on his forehead and roll down his cheek. And then another.

Was Wilbur...?

Tommy pulled back.

Oh.

“Wilbur. Will.” Tommy said, caught between a laugh and a sob, “I’m not leaving. Idiot.”

Wilbur looked lost—eyes distant, expression twisted into grief. Tommy could tell it took a few seconds before the words even registered. “But. You just said...”

The words cut off in a snuffle.

“Oh. *Oh*.” Wilbur said, dumbfounded. His jaw went slack.

“You... you little *shit*.” He said, though there was no real heat behind it.

Tommy barked out a laugh, smiling up at Wilbur as he pulled away from his arms. “I’m sorry. Really. I just...”

“I had to be sure. I couldn’t just wait and see and take your word on it, and I *know* you think that means I don’t trust you but—you don’t understand. I do, I trust you guys, but my—my mind doesn’t work like that, I can’t just...be sure. Because I’ve been sure before, and I’ve been wrong before, and I can’t just believe in people like that.” Tommy shrugged, fiddling with his hands, “And you don’t get it, and that’s *fine*, but I just...I needed to be sure that you wouldn’t try to keep me there again. I won’t have someone force me to stop my work or be something I’m not. Not again.”

“We won’t. We *won’t*.” Phil promised with such raw conviction that Tommy almost forgot about his many, *many* doubts.

“Yeah?” Tommy replied with a small smile.

Wilbur nodded furiously, “It’s okay. It’s okay if you don’t believe him. We’ll have all the time in the world to prove it to you.” He straightened, pacing across the room with almost manic energy. “For now let’s just—let’s just get you back to the Depths okay? We have a lot to talk about with Dre...with everything that’s happened in the last few months. We haven’t touched your room, you know. It’s just the same. If we head to the shuttles now, we should be able to make it before sundown. Phil, can you see if you can get that Sapnap guy to let us out of here? I’m sure they’d like to send Tommy off before—”

Tommy blinked—weren’t they moving a little fast?

Did they really think it would be that easy?

“Hey! Hold up, assholes. I still have some conditions.” He interrupted and Wilbur froze in his tracks.

One of Phil’s eyebrows quirked. “...conditions?”

Techno chuckled from where he leaned against the wall. “What else did you expect from the kid, Phil? Really.”

A change came over Phil’s face then, his expression settling into something sharper, more wolfish. It was a look Tommy had only seen twice before—when Tommy had eavesdropped on them discussing a job, just before everything had gone wrong, and when Phil had stormed into George’s throne room in a storm of blood and silver. It wasn’t gentle or fierce or

There was something almost proud in his eyes as he gave Tommy a nod. “Go ahead.”

It was time to see if they were serious about their promises.

Tommy threw himself into the nearest chair, leaning forward and propping his head in his hands, his face perfectly serious. "No more secrets. I don't want any more bombs dropped on me, okay? Everything better be completely transparent after this. I don't think I could—could deal with it if you guys lied to me like that again."

Phil tilted his head in that passive, professional way of his. "That's perfectly understandable, Toms. We can have a full debriefing once we get back to the base—"

"I wasn't done." Tommy interrupted.

Phil's lips pressed together like he was trying not to smile. "Ah. My bad, then. By all means."

"Condition two." Tommy said, raising two fingers and shooting Phil a dirty look that said *at least try to take this seriously*, "I'm not quitting my job with the Feral gang. Continue my job as Theseus and such. I spent way too long off the grid before—I've had no less than thirty messages from my clients in the last few months asking whether I had been compromised. I want the shuttles to be open to me at all times."

That gave Phil a little more pause, though he did a good job of covering it. "...given that you inform us beforehand, I'm sure we could see the proper provisions made, some safety measures instated—"

"Nope. No supervision, nobody watching over me, none of that shit. I get jobs on a moment's notice sometimes, who says I'll even have time to tell you guys?" It was a lie, and Tommy knew he was pushing his luck, but that was sort of the point, wasn't it? He needed to see how far he could go. "I want to be able to leave. Whenever I want."

Something dawned in Techno's eyes, then, a realization of sorts, and Tommy knew he understood what he was really asking.

Techno pushed himself off the wall, leaning in to Phil's ear and whispering under his breath before stepping back again. Phil's eyes widened as he spoke, glancing towards Techno and nodding once before turning back to Tommy.

"You'll let us know when you're heading out or leave a note. You get twenty hours without contact and then one of us will come looking for you. Any longer trips or if you need some time away you can just let us know." Phil compromised, "Same standard practice that Will and Techno follow."

"Hm." It wasn't exactly the free reign he'd asked for, but he supposed it made enough sense.

Tommy's first rule for his line of work was simple—expect the worst. A clean, easy job was an impossibility in Manburg, and more often than not Tommy got into tricky situations.

One of the worst had been stealing the microchip from TechCorp. Tommy remembered how it was like yesterday, being trapped in that maze of vents with a faulty map and bad intel, struggling for breathe as the cold metal pressed in on him, without anyway or any *one* to call for backup. He remembered realizing that no one—*no one*—knew where he was. Not Sam or Skeppy or Bad, and they were barely even talking to him then. It'd take days, *weeks*, for them to even notice he wasn't hanging around.

Maybe it wouldn't be so horrible to have someone watching his back on the outside for once. Someone who would know where he was and what he was doing and would actually *care* if he didn't come back.

Tommy shrugged, keeping his face impassive. "Fine, fine, whatever. Three—uh."

He paused.

Confession time—Tommy had only thought of two conditions for his return. He'd sort of thought there would be more haggling over them, or at least, he didn't know, *something*. He hadn't expected Phil to just...give in.

But now Phil was staring at him expectantly, and Wilbur was watching him with more happiness than Tommy had ever seen in his face, and hell if Tommy wasn't going to milk that for all it was worth.

"My training with Techno resumes." He added with feigned confidence.

Techno snorted, rolling his eyes. "Bruhh. Phil, these aren't even real requirements anymore, the kid's just blackmailing us."

Phil turned to shoot the man a scolding glare. "*Techno*."

His message was clear— *shut up*. Tommy peeked over Phil's side and shot Techno his most smug grin.

His eyes widened. "*Phil*—look at his *face*, he's playing you."

Tommy quickly schooled his expression into one of bored nonchalance as Phil turned back to him. "Well?"

"Techno agrees." Phil replied with a firm nod.

"He—wow, okay, uh." Tommy hadn't really thought it would be this easy, but hey, if Phil was offering whatever he wanted, who was he to refuse? Never let it be said that he wasn't a swindler at heart. "And— *and* I want to try on those wings."

Phil's whole 'professional businessman' act stuttered at his words, his eyes going wide and shocked. "Oh. You want—I thought you didn't—you didn't—"

Finally, *finally* he was getting some sort of push back. Finally, he'd see where they drew the line.

Tommy shrugged, smiling as cheekily as he could. "Hey, you said it, not me. You wanna try and manipulate me, bitch? Suffer the consequences. You're gonna teach me how to use the knife wings, so help me Prime."

"Yeah, no, I don't—no, no, that wasn't me saying no or anything Toms, I just—" For a second Phil's pupils were unusually large, though he quickly ironed out his expression to the same impassive one as before, "Yes. Yes, that sounds fine."

...Wait, what? Phil was actually serious about that? Tommy blinked.

Why were these people so endlessly confusing?

From somewhere behind Phil, Wilbur was muttering to Techno under his breath. "--wrapped around his finger. Wouldn't let me touch those wings with a ten foot pole."

Phil rolled his eyes contentedly. "Wilbur. Shush."

Wilbur frowned, though there was no real anger behind it. "Look, Phil, I'm simply stating the facts of the matter. You remember when I tried to add designs to them as a gift for your *birthday* and you—"

"Wil, they're very delicate—"

"So you're giving them to *Tommy*?" Wilbur's face was in his hands as he pushed his hair back, "Phil, what the fu—"

"Tommy." Phil interrupted, turning back to him and ignoring Wilbur muttering angrily behind him, "Is there anything else?"

Tommy paused. What else could he get out of this? They seemed--beyond anything he'd believed possible, they seemed like they were willing to give him whatever he asked. They seemed willing to treat him as one of their own.

He remembered what it had been like in the before, when he didn't have the callouses on his hands or worry about killer drones, and he remembered the why--the *who*-- of him leaving, and suddenly, it became perfect clear what he would ask for with his final request.

Tommy grinned.

“Yeah, actually.” He said slowly, nonchalantly, “Your whole revolution thing? Taking down Schlatt?”

Phil swallowed. Techno gave a slow nod.

Tommy leaned in, settling his elbows on his knees.

“I want in.”

Chapter End Notes

hope you all enjoyed :))

thank you to everyone who voted in the twitter poll, the chapter's out because of you! <3 super excited for the TLH song!!

just remember that now ao3 has a block button. i read my comments. you have been warned

the last recap

Chapter Summary

i know its been a bit since i posted a chapter, so here's a quick recap!

next chapter will be out July 21st :)) NO IT WILL NOT GUYS I HAD SOME FAMILY ISSUES
CHAPTER WILL BE OUT WHENEVER I CAN GET TO IT PLS DO NOT HARASS ME

Chapter Notes

Howdy! With my new jobs I've been putting updates out around once a month, so I figured it would be helpful to bring back the infamous TLH recaps one last time before the story wraps up.

This chapter is going to be structured a little differently than past ones, with a <50 word summary of each chapter so you don't need to go back and re-read whenever you forget the plot

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Glossary :

The Lights – Upper-class districts of Manburg

Mid-levels – middle ring of the city, home to middle class citizens and shops

Slums / Eastside – Tommy's home district and lower-class area of the city

Underground / Pogtopia – criminal underground consisting of a labyrinth beneath the city and an online black market

Bordertowns – the most dangerous area of the city, the decrepit villages that border the Walls

The Walls – towering walls that surround the entirety of the city, protecting them from the monsters outside

The Depths – the secret criminal underground below the secret criminal underground; consists of a massive cave and flourishing civilization kept entirely secret from those on the surface. Ruled by two gangs, one of which is the Antarctic gang.

Glow – highly addictive drug; lets users live out their fantasies and makes their skin glow

Feral Gang – gang consisting of George, Sapnap, Karl, and company

Antarctic Gang – gang consisting of Phil, Wilbur, and Techno

The Flash – nuclear armageddon that occurred ~32 years before the story, prompting the fall of humanity, the creation of the mobs, and the founding of Lmanburg.

Lmanburg – previous name of Manburg; it's leadership was ended in a violent coup headed by Schlatt

Chapter Summaries :

1. Tommy gets caught stealing a microchip by a guard squadron and runs to escape them and some drones. He makes a narrow escape to The Underground via a secret entranceway in the Lights. Spoiler alert: it goes to Quackity's casino
2. Tommy looks for a way to get back home as he admires the Quackity's casino and contemplates Glow users slumped over in the room. He's threatened by Quackity, who shows him the way back to Eastside once he realizes Tommy isn't there to steal from him.
3. Tommy makes it back to his house above Bad and Skeppy's bakery, drops off the microchip he stole for 404 and the Feral gang, and is gifted a lighter from Sapnap. He returns home, exhausted, only to find a message from one Philza waiting for him.
4. Tommy freaks out about the message and hits his head. He goes to Sam to ask for information on the gang and the man freaks out, yells at him, and kicks him out. Tommy accepts Philza's offer and is met with an unexpected call.
5. Tommy panics but realizes he must accept the call. He meets Wilbur, and the two instantly dislike each other, exchanging snubs while they negotiate the terms his employment. Tommy is ultimately convinced to accept their offer, but vows to find blackmail on the gang to ensure his safety
6. Tommy goes to Quackity's casino for information and Quackity saves him from a rich patron. He learns there are three leaders of the gang, but only Wilbur is known to the public.
7. Tommy pickpockets in the mid-levels, runs off, and is beaten up by Dream for avoiding him. Dream says Tommy only owes him a few more Primes. Tommy gets his first job from Wilbur—steal the Archbishop's (Fundy's) ring at the President's annual festival
8. Tommy is struggling to prepare for his job. Wilbur gives him details about Fundy's appearance, but Tommy still needs info on the festival layout. Sam slams the door in his face, but a chance encounter with trap shop owner Purpled proves more fruitful than he ever could have imagined
9. Wilbur snaps not to bother showing his face unless he gets the ring. Tommy makes his way to the festival, swipes a downtrodden Fundy's ring, and makes a smooth escape as the guards search for it. He can't help but taunt Fundy as he does.
10. Wilbur is excited to hear Tommy has retrieved the ring, which startles Tommy. Skeppy interrupts their call—he has seen warrants out across the city for someone who looks suspiciously like Tommy and promises if guards show up he won't hesitate to give him up. Tommy gets his next job.
11. Tommy gets lost in the vents during his second job—stealing a microchip from the most high-security tech company in the city. After he finds his way to the CEO's office he sets off a tripwire, is attacked by drones, and dodges a guard as he steals the microchip.
12. Tommy makes a narrow escape, killing a guard in the process. He runs into Dream as he heads back to Eastside, and the man tricks him into following him and pushes him into a safe. Tommy freaks out, and is only saved hours later by someone named Ranboo.
13. Tommy realizes he's late for his check-in call and rushes home, only to find Wilbur talking to a mysterious person he soon learns is Technoblade. The call is tense, but both are impressed he managed to complete the job. Techno insists Tommy get his next job, though Wilbur is reluctant
14. Tommy sets out to complete his third job—climbing the Walls. He makes a dangerous trek through the Bordertowns, scales hundreds of feet of cold stone, and reaches a drone nest, only for the drones to activate as he tries to retrieve his objective. They attack, and Tommy falls.
15. Drones attack Tommy, and he manages to use them to slow his fall. He tries to escape through the Bordertowns, and a strange kid (Tubbo) fries all the drones before disappearing. Tommy gets shot, but makes it to his apartment. He calls Wilbur one last time to apologize before passing out.

16. Wilbur and Technoblade show up to find a dying, desperate Tommy, convinced they are trying to kill him. He lunges at Wilbur and passes out in his arms. When he wakes he's alone in the Antarctic gang's base. He roams the halls looking for escape and stumbles on Phil instead
17. Fanart archive (CHECK IT OUT, SERIOUSLY!)
18. A cornered Tommy attempts to escape but blacks out. When he wakes, he's tied to a chair, surrounded by the gang. They have a terse interaction—Tommy wants to leave, they want him to stay 'until he's better'; Tommy figures it's a trick and resolves to escape.
19. Tommy attempts—and fails—to escape for days. The entire time, Phil tries to talk with him, Wilbur ignores him, and Tommy won't eat or sleep. Techno finally gets tired of it and takes Tommy to his library for a talk. The two come to a fragile agreement—Tommy will stay, for now.
20. Tommy has individual bonding moments with Phil and Techno. Wilbur continues to avoid him.
21. The infamous hiatus prank
22. Crimeboys somewhat reconcile. Tommy learns about the history of the city, and is introduced to the Depths.
23. Tommy goes shopping! He finds out Purpled works in the Depths and with the gang. As the weeks pass, he gets more comfortable at the base. Technoblade starts to train him, and Wilbur teaches him how to shoot. Tommy overhears the gang talking about a job, offers his help, and is laughed at.
24. Tommy sneaks out and pulls off the gang's job by himself to prove them wrong. When the Antarctic gang returns to find Tommy has snubbed them, Wilbur snaps and tells Tommy that all of his previous jobs—including the one that almost killed him--were nothing more than tests. Tommy runs.
25. Purpled helps Tommy get out of the Depths. Tommy reunites with a shaken Skeppy and finds Sam's shop in ruins.
26. Tommy tries to find Quackity and meets a killer robot that is convinced it's human. He plans to start working with 404 (the Feral gang), and recruits Tubbo and a mind-controlled Ranboo. Meanwhile, the gang tries to find their fourth member.
27. Months pass. Tommy does jobs for the Feral boys and regularly meets with Ranboo and Tubbo. Eventually, he lets his guard down—until the Antarctic gang attacks, nearly killing 404 before Tommy intervenes.
28. Tommy, George, and SBI decide the gang can stay for a week. Ranboo & Tubbo offer to step in, but Tommy turns them down. The gang learns that Tommy is not, in fact, being held against his will. Wilbur and Tommy make a wager. The gang continues to interfere with Tommy's work.
29. Wilbur and Tommy have a shooting competition. Tommy gets injured while he and Sapnap spar—Techno takes this personally. Phil asks why Tommy doesn't exist in any records. Tommy visits beeduo and senses he's being watched. He assumes it's Dream and is puzzled when it's Wilbur who steps out of the shadows.
30. Tommy realizes Dream was never there—it was just the gang interfering in his life again—and Tubbo sends his horde of drones after Wilbur. When Tommy shows back up at the Feral base hours later, he confronts Techno, Phil, and Wilbur.
31. Everything boils over. The gang finally understands and tries to make amends, with little progress. Wilbur gives Tommy the ring he retrieved on his first job. Techno and Tommy have a talk, and Tommy learns a little more about the man's history and the gang's motives.
32. Tommy tries to avoid the gang, but the Feral boys meddle and lock them in a room together. SBI tries to heal their relationship, but Tommy is suspicious of their motives. He tests Wilbur, and when the man passes, he finally negotiates his return to the Depths with SBI.

Chapter End Notes

i havent had the energy to actually write, so ive been spending my time fixing old chaps instead!
 chapters 1 - 20 have been edited :D

anyway, hope you guys enjoyed the recap, i lose track of fics i read super often so i know this will be useful for jogging peoples' memory. next (actual) chapter will be out July 21st <3

announcement

Chapter Summary

yeah...so....

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hey everyone. Long time no see.

So honestly this story has been over for a while. I sort of lost interest in DSMP back in June of 2022 and just didn't really want to write this anymore. I always sort of thought I might come back and finish it, but with the info I learned about Wilbur and Shubble in the last few days....yeah, that's not going to happen.

This fic will always be a big turning point in my life since it really encouraged me to pursue creative writing more seriously. I started writing this when I was 16, at the lowest point in my life, and it was genuinely such a comfort to me to see people enjoy my silly little minecraft youtuber writing. I can't emphasize enough how much I love and appreciate you all for the wonderful comments and feedback you've given me over the years. But I just have no desire to finish writing about characters based on creators I don't really support anymore, especially not with some of the darker themes the story has.

So yeah. I might post one final chapter detailing what plans I had for the remaining plot if people are interested. I also always had plans to adapt this world into a sci-fi novel, so if I ever follow through with that I'll post here. But other than that, this is done. Sorry for anyone that might be disappointed.

Thank you again :) Been a crazy ride.

Chapter End Notes

support shubble

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